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Exploring Internationalisation and EDI: an open conversation

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Introduction

This special issue creates a space for dialogue to critically examine unproblematised notions of internationalisation, mobility, global citizenship, and equity in higher education. Although seemingly neutral and innocuous, these notions operate to position international students and international academics within politicized binaries of indigeneity/alienation, nativism/foreign, natural/unnatural, local/global, instantiating them as inherently pathological subjects and subjects in the making. Far from being fixed, these binaries are always shifting, negotiated and contested in the daily experiences of transnational and intercultural lives and their associated projects of belonging and othering within and beyond the seemingly diverse spaces of higher education institutions. In this concluding piece, we created an open forum and invited three of the contributors to the special issue to share their unique insights on two key questions, the first relating to their experiences of internationalisation and the second dedicated to the most pressing issues in the field. Through these inquiries, we aimed to provide a platform for these three contributors to further elaborate on their own voices and experiences in the field from their perspectives as international academics. The three contributors are Karolina Lendák-Kabók, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, Serbia; Charikleia Charoula Tzanakou, Reader in Human Resource Management (with a focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) at Oxford Brookes University, UK; Ramzi Merabet, Lecturer in EAP and Intercultural Studies at University of Leeds, UK.

- 1. What draws you to research in internationalisation from an intercultural and EDI perspective? How does your international/migrant academic standpoint inform your exploration of this field?**

Karolina

I see it as an opportunity to explore how different cultural and social dynamics intersect and impact the experiences of individuals in diverse educational and social settings. I am particularly interested in understanding how intercultural communication and EDI principles shape the policies, practices, and lived realities within institutions, especially in the context of migration and internationalisation in higher education. From my standpoint as an international academic, my experiences have been shaped by navigating different cultural contexts, educational systems, and academic environments. This personal journey has provided me with a unique lens to explore how EDI and interculturality influence the integration, representation, and success of migrants and other minority groups in various settings.

My work aims to bridge theoretical insights with practical applications, contributing to more inclusive and equitable environments where diverse voices are valued and empowered. Being an academic from a region with complex ethnic and cultural dynamics, such as Vojvodina, Serbia, has further shaped my perspective. It has led me to focus on how ethnic diversity, identity, and gender intersect with social inequalities and integration challenges. This background enables me to bring a nuanced understanding of how global EDI frameworks can be adapted to local contexts, addressing both the challenges and potentials of diversity.

Charikleia

Having been a migrant myself, coming from Greece initially to pursue postgraduate studies and subsequently an academic career, and having worked abroad in two highly internationalised working places in the European University Association in Brussels and UK academic institutions, I think my experience has undoubtedly led to research questions around internationalisation from an intercultural perspective initially and subsequently EDI

perspective. From a personal development perspective, working in international environments has been an enriching experience, prompting me to critically reflect on my own assumptions and beliefs, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of my positionality as a researcher. Moreover, my standpoint as a migrant academic has further fuelled my research curiosity, particularly in examining how internationalisation research can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the discourses and practices that may perpetuate inequalities. By critically engaging with these issues, I aim to explore how such efforts can challenge stereotypes and power dynamics, ultimately promoting a more inclusive approach to internationalisation.

Ramzi

My interest in researching internationalisation and interculturality is mainly influenced by the desire to make higher education a more sustainable and fair space for everyone.

Unfortunately, research in the aforementioned areas is ripe with assumptions about what makes a space international, who is responsible for that, and how the international subject, who is mostly objectified in research and practice, should be looked at, framed, researched, etc. This, I argue, creates an ossified space, where the other is always international, eventually reinforcing a problematic domestic/foreign, or home/international binary. Instead of taking this binary for granted and pursuing research that allegedly claims to look into ‘international students’ belonging, adaptation, integration, and several other themes that assume that these individuals are in need of special treatment, support, or ‘saving’ at times, I decided to question the taken-for-granted assumption that students are ‘international’. What if we think for a moment that students are labelled international, that the label is imposed on them without any potential to challenge what the label assumes or indicates? Suddenly we can realise that a substantial amount of current research has not even taken this assumption

into account, sometimes resulting in research that accommodates researchers' and their respective institutions' objectives, without even critically exploring what one actually is.

Another important point to highlight, as also demonstrated throughout my paper, is the hardly disputed fact that the label facilitates a plethora of forms of neoliberal exploitation, whereby one's presumed, and mostly imagined, difference is mobilised to exploit them financially. If we look at the way UK Higher Education Institutions generate income, we will notice a worrying and increasingly normalised trend to use students labelled international to compensate for any financial deficit, with some institutions' annual income showing a 50% reliance on international student tuition. The label justifies the exploitative approach that we adopt when dictating tuition fees. The impact of this neoliberal rationality is pervasive and leads to the normalisation of neoliberalism in a HE setting. In fact, researchers themselves, who are supposedly expected to approach this matter critically sometimes end up mobilising a neoliberal mindset when referring to individuals' experiences. For example, I am currently working on a paper that investigates belonging in HE and I was shocked to come across a peer-reviewed paper that openly links the need to foster institutional belonging owing to the financial benefits resulting from that.

Now, when does interculturality come into play in all of this? Interculturality is both the cardinal sin and the only way forward in redefining our HE spaces and how they operate. Assumptions that stem from a positivist understanding of interculturality and intercultural competence have for decades framed otherness as a construct that exists beyond the national border. This resulted in false assumptions about difference (who is different/alien/foreign, etc.) and provided a ground for justifying differential treatment within and beyond HE contexts. You can walk around any university campus in the UK to realise that leaflets,

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posters, promotional materials, website contents, student union events, university strategies, casual lunch discussions, and several other settings mobilise students/staff nationality as a marker of an inherent difference, eventually neglecting the very obvious fact that difference resides within and beyond the self, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, etc. At this point, some readers would be arguing ‘yes, but there are big differences that distinguish individuals from different nationalities’. The short response here is indeed, there are big differences at the national level, but those are hardly useful means to understand the complex trajectories of individual students. If I find it inappropriate, and indeed insulting, to ask ChatGPT ‘what are the Brits like?’ and then use that to paint every person I assume to be British, then why is it difficult for key actors in HE spaces to part ways with this obsolete mindset?

Since interculturality is a double bind I believe we can mobilise it to reshape our HE spaces. The keyword here, which I am currently researching, is ‘space’. Who owns HE spaces? Are we owners, equal owners? Who decides how the space operates? What’s the purpose and the long-term goal? Who is benefitting from this space? Does the space accommodate a multiplicity of epistemological stances? Can we engage in fair and sustainable ‘knowledging’ within this space? What do we assume about the inhabitants of this space? Are they temporary visitors? Equal shareholders? Only when we are ready to question our assumptions about our immediate HE spaces that we can fully understand how ‘international’ and other labels are inhibiting one’s choices and beings.

2. What are the most pressing issues in exploring internationalisation and intercultural communication in terms of research and/or EDI practice?

Karolina

Exploring internationalisation and intercultural communication presents several pressing issues in both research and EDI practice. These issues stem from the complex interplay of cultural dynamics, power structures, and institutional frameworks that shape interactions in international and multicultural settings. In my opinion the most challenging issues are the following:

1. Understanding Power Dynamics and Cultural Hegemony: Research in internationalisation and intercultural communication must critically examine the power imbalances inherent in global interactions. This includes addressing how Western-centric norms and values often dominate academic discourse and organizational practices, which can marginalize non-Western perspectives. A more inclusive approach requires deconstructing these hegemonic structures and fostering equitable dialogues that genuinely integrate diverse voices.
2. Addressing Language Barriers and Inequities: Language plays a critical role in intercultural communication. In academic settings, for instance, the predominance of English as the lingua franca can create inequities, where non-native speakers face additional challenges in expressing their ideas and gaining recognition. Research needs to explore strategies for multilingual inclusion and the impacts of linguistic hierarchies on knowledge production and dissemination.
3. Navigating Intersectionality in EDI Practice: Effective EDI practice requires an intersectional approach that considers how race/ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, and other identities intersect to shape individuals' experiences in international and intercultural contexts. There is a need for research that highlights these complexities

and provides practical frameworks for organizations to develop policies that recognize and address these intersecting identities.

4. Promoting Cultural Competence and Sensitivity: Research and practice must focus on developing cultural competence and sensitivity among individuals and organizations. This involves not only acquiring knowledge about different cultures but also understanding the socio-historical contexts that shape intercultural interactions. EDI initiatives should prioritize training programs that go beyond surface-level cultural awareness to foster deeper empathy and understanding.
5. Measuring the Impact of Internationalisation and EDI Initiatives: One of the key challenges in both research and practice is developing robust metrics to assess the effectiveness of internationalisation and EDI initiatives. This requires moving beyond quantitative measures of diversity (e.g., the number of international students or employees) to more qualitative assessments that capture the lived experiences of diverse groups and the depth of intercultural engagement.
6. Responding to Global Mobility and Changing Demographics: The increasing mobility of people across borders due to globalization, migration, and international education requires research that keeps pace with these demographic changes. This includes understanding the evolving needs and challenges faced by international students, scholars, and workers, as well as developing policies that support their integration and success.

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3 7. Addressing Resistance and Backlash: Implementing intercultural and
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5 internationalisation strategies often encounters resistance, both at the institutional
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7 level and among individuals. Research should explore the roots of this resistance,
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9 whether they are cultural, political, or economic, and develop strategies to overcome
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11 them in a way that promotes constructive dialogue and mutual understanding.
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17 Overall, advancing research and EDI practice in internationalisation and intercultural
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19 communication demands a nuanced, intersectional, and context-sensitive approach that
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21 addresses these pressing issues to foster truly inclusive and equitable environments.
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26 **Charikleia**

27
28 One of the most critical areas for further exploration is the complexity of internationalisation
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30 and its multifaceted impact on individuals, institutions, and the systems of knowledge
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32 production in higher education and research. A deeper understanding is required of the
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34 tensions and frictions that arise from discourses and experiences of internationalisation and
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36 intercultural communication. Much of the existing discourse presents internationalisation in a
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38 simplistic and idealised manner, often framed as a universal good where all participants are
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40 presumed to benefit. However, this narrative obscures the fact that the operationalisation of
41
42 internationalisation, particularly through mechanisms such as mobility schemes and
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44 international collaborations, often reinforces existing inequalities or generates new ones. For
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46 instance, in a special issue (Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021), we problematised the binary of
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48 academic mobility versus immobility, illustrating how international mobility is frequently
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50 promoted as essential for career progression, networking, and knowledge exchange, without
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52 adequately addressing issues of access or the hidden, ambivalent experiences and adverse
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54 outcomes faced by mobile academics. Similarly, international collaborations, which are
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incentivised by research funding structures, often perpetuate assumptions about knowledge hierarchies between the Global North and South. These collaborations, far from challenging entrenched power dynamics, can instead reinforce colonial legacies by imposing Westernised norms and practices—such as approaches to equity, diversity, and inclusion, as discussed in our paper in this special issue of EDI- on 'less advanced' higher education institutions. In doing so, they fail to disrupt the existing hierarchies in knowledge production, thereby sustaining the status quo.

Tzanakou, C., Henderson, E.F. Stuck and sticky in mobile academia: reconfiguring the im/mobility binary. *High Educ* **82**, 685–693 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00710-x>

Ramzi

The main issue that comes to my mind when thinking about research and practices that focus on internationalisation and interculturality is the lack of rigorous theoretical engagement with the underpinnings of the terminologies, word choices, stances, and methodological approaches used to research internationalisation and interculturality, and the type of research that results from that. For example, a significant number of papers I read in contexts where international students and their experiences are researched take the notions of culture and interculturality at face value or make use of widely contested Hofstedian frameworks to link one’s nationality to their presumed culture and expected behaviours. This essentialist framing ignores the complex and rich trajectories of individuals within an international setting and organises their presumed differences, which serves to justify deficit narratives, imposed homogenisations, and stereotypes.

Due to the afore highlighted doxas, EDI discourses and practices within institutional settings are framed around narratives of difference. Instead of disrupting the formation of homogenising categories and labels, research and practices end up reinforcing them while assuming to have achieved some form of social or institutional justice. This is what I perceive to be a common and increasingly pressing issue that needs to be addressed.

Conclusion

Giuliana and Maria

In our editorial, we have highlighted social justice as one of the most pressing issues facing internationalisation in HE. This seems to align with the reflections of three of the contributors to this special issue. It is interesting that internationally mobile academics have answered the call to publish their work in this special issue, and that their experiences seem to point at the intersections of inequality that affect both students and academics in neoliberal, globalised academia. From our perspective, the axes of inequality affecting students and academics highlighted in the individual papers and in the reflections in this open forum, form the basis for future research in the topic of internationalisation, interculturality and EDI. In particular, we think that a broader discussion is needed that involves voices from wider geo-political contexts, including Africa and Asia, in order to further explore and problematise the implications of internationalisation in an increasingly fractured and unequal world. As a way of concluding this special issue and this open forum, we would invite readers to engage with the papers from a perspective that questions taken for granted assumptions on mobility and equality, diversity and inclusion.