

## **Conceptualising to transcend: Glocal imaginaries and the international student**

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### **Research Domains**

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

### **Abstract**

This paper/chapter argues that a promising step towards reducing the harm that stems from theorising as if standpoint does not matter is to discover the ways in which local and global are mutually constituted. To rehabilitate research with international students into the dialogic arena opened up by the global-local continuum, we recommend putting place back in focus. We explore the potential of the dialectic between the global and the local to realign research with practice and to nurture context-sensitive conceptualisation. Research with international students which harnesses the rich insights stemming from marginality and not belonging, the paper/chapter hopes to demonstrate, in turn generates transformative understandings of all levels of analysis including the global and local and further nudges us towards anchoring knowledge creation in relational ontologies.

### **Full paper**

Misconstruing the global and local as a binary and has contributed to entrenchment of the deficit approach in thinking about international students. Local must not be conceptualised as the very act has usually left it essentialised, particularised and relativised. Global must first be deconceptualized to account for readings which trouble its homogenising thrust and presumed inevitability. Thereafter, a promising step towards reducing the harm that stems from

theorising as if standpoint does not matter is to discover the ways in which local and global are mutually constituted. In an epistemic framework derived from these influences, we conceptualise not against incoherence and meaningless-less but alongside them. Deconceptualising global is a necessary step for the very exercise of conceptualisation to confront its limits and face the music of unspoken assumptions and unintended consequences. As I have noted elsewhere, “what is envisaged is a thriving pluriversal knowledge commons which will displace hegemonic claims of universality as the gold standard” (Unkule, 2021).

By bucking the methodological nationalism embedded in disciplines, global studies attest that “globals can be partial” yet, “always fashioned and explored within regimes of value and hierarchies of power across multiple scales” (Kahn, 2014, p7). The epistemic bandwidth thus afforded by naming the encompassing and shape-shifting features of the global, adds to the range of levels of analysis perceptible within the International Higher Education landscape. But for those seeking to tap into lessons from an ongoing conversation between said levels, such recognising and naming can only be a point of departure – lest it merely replace methodological nationalism and its accessories, statism and coloniality, as the dominant frame, conspiring to silence all others.

### Research with international students informed by glocal allegiance and accountability

How does doing research with international students enable us to embrace marginality as a standpoint for conceptualising and theorising? Marginality is envisaged here not as a disadvantage or a steady state of oppression, but as a manifestation of the nimble-footed beginner’s mind attitude, or, for the more pragmatically geared, a disavowal of the saturated mainstream. Put differently, how do we make seeking out borderland spaces from where convention is destabilised and agency is democratised as an integral, albeit subversive, part of our research endeavour? In positing that “the position of a ‘stranger’ becomes a potential competitive advantage to generate new knowledge capital” Kim (2017, p 986) hints at how liminality could spark creativity. The

unique insight that stems from being “other” in both home and host societies affirms the centrality of reflexivity – a reflexivity heightened by an emerging consciousness of translocal identity formation in the case of international students. Here, the local-global continuum helpfully reminds us that such fledgeling identities should not be assumed as levelling inherent disparities or entirely novel constructs which allow absolute transcendence of situatedness but rather, as an arena for challenging well-worn scripts from a vantage of not belonging.

Another question worth posing is: What does operating on the mutually constituted local-global continuum mean for the ability of concepts to travel? To what extent does the continuum relieve the burden of universalistic pretensions of knowledge creation via theorising? International student experiences frame the phenomenon of belonging and connectedness to place in ways that elude the off-the-shelf primordial or liberal-citizenship or cosmopolitan-nomad templates. Through their exploration of how international students’ ways of relating to place dynamise the frames of ‘here’ and ‘there’, Hasnain and Hajek (2022) arrive at the notion of ‘translocal connectedness’. Based on their review of the Erasmus study abroad framework which they describe as “primarily a group experience of being foreign”, Viol and Klasen (2021, p 25) argue that the experience of place itself can be significantly mediated by the strength of friendships formed there – upending routine assumptions about culture shock. Such definitional non-conformity is not only methodologically transformative but also potentially confounds orthodox governmentalities and policy interventions.

In our quest for enduring myths, much critical research about and with international students has been preoccupied with minimising difference, managing diversity, mitigating hybridity and maintaining continuity with neo-colonial regimes of knowledge creation and resource (including demographic) extraction. It is when we challenge the inevitability and give voice to inherent inconsistencies, inadequacy, and irreconcilability of this prevailing paradigm – its methodological complicity, its epistemological conceit, its ontological disconnect and its cosmo-axiological vacuity – that we will have instead harnessed the power of the parable to express the timeless

through the situated.

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