

Understanding International Students' Activism and Resistance - A Systematic Literature Review

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Situated within an emergent research strand about international students' agency, this paper reports on the findings of a systematic literature review informed by the following research question: How has the involvement of international students in activism and resistance initiatives been addressed in the literature? Twelve publications were selected as addressing this topic, coming mostly from the Education disciplinary area, and adopting almost exclusively a qualitative approach. This suggests that international students' activism/resistance is a severely under-researched topic in need of empirical and theoretical development. Nonetheless, the analysis allowed identifying two main perspectives in the literature regarding international students' engagement with activism or resistance: a political/sociological perspective related to contestation and the fight for individual rights/freedoms (sometimes with a historical focus) and an educational perspective related to these students' resistance to institutionalised norms and practices embedded in unequal power relations.

Full paper

Introduction

Research on international students has overwhelmingly focused on the challenging experiences they face when confronted with new sociocultural and academic environments. An emergent line of research investigates how these students navigate these new environments, not as passive recipients, but as active shapers of their study abroad experience (Arthur, 2017; Heng, 2017; Ploner, 2017; Tran & Vu, 2018). This agency-focused approach invites a shift in the analysis from experience to practices (Deuchar, 2022). International students' acts of resistance or activism represent one such instance of agency. Aiming to explore how international students are involved in such acts, this paper reports on a systematic literature review guided by the following question: How has the involvement of international students in activism and resistance initiatives been addressed in the literature?

Methodology

A systematic literature review was conducted following the PRISMA statement (Moher et al., 2009). After the successive stages of searching in Scopus, eliminating duplicates, screening the results based on

pre-defined inclusion criteria and reading the full texts, 12 publications were selected for the final analysis set.

Findings

Among the 12 selected texts, ten were journal articles, one was a book chapter and one a paper published in conference proceedings. The majority belonged to the Education disciplinary area. The texts spanned a year range from 2005 to 2023. However, there was a concentration of texts in 2022 and 2023, indicating a recent surge in interest in the subject. Two main themes were identified, based on the publications' research questions and/or objectives: *Experience(s), identity/ies, subjectivity/ies* (Govi et al., 2023; Koehne, 2005; Matsunaga et al., 2020; Matters et al., 2022; Pang, 2016; van Oorschot, 2014) and *Agency and activism* (Fay et al., 2023; Lubotzky, 2022; Schenck, 2019; Tran & Vu, 2018; Weiss & Ford, 2011; Yu, 2022). Most articles focused on the USA and Australia as host countries, while in terms of home countries/regions, a notable presence of Asian countries was observed. Publications generally either had no theoretical framework or drew on more than one theory (e.g., postcolonial theory, postmodernism, agency theory). Regarding methodology, qualitative studies prevailed.

Instances of activism and/or resistance were addressed at two levels: first, the more traditional political and social contestation and the fight for individual rights and freedoms in society and, second, the resistance to norms and practices in higher education. At the first level, two studies took a historical perspective. Lubotzky (2022) discussed African students' responses to racism and prejudice in Israel during the 1960s. Schenck (2019) described how Angolan students in the former German Democratic Republic resisted and negotiated rules which infringed their individual freedoms. Weiss and Ford (2011) and Yu (2022) considered the effects of globalisation and international mobility on activism, showing how temporary migration tempers activist attitudes and, respectively, disengagement with the fight against racism and xenophobia. Conversely, Govi et al. (2023) addressed the mobilisation of international students who advocated for equal rights to their domestic counterparts.

The second level contained studies about international students' resistance to institutional practices and norms embedded in unequal power relations. Matsunaga et al. (2020) referred to acts of resistance in the form of silence and body language, while Pang (2016) offered examples of how resistance could manifest through emotions when cultural differences are not acknowledged. Tran and Vu (2018) bring to the fore international students' agency through advocacy for change and complaints against unfavourable institutional and social contexts. Van Oorschot (2014) argued that international students engaged in processes of negotiation and contestation of Western pedagogic practices. Similarly, Fay and colleagues (2023) argued for epistemic justice, calling for researcher activism in the use of diverse languages, challenging institutional norms. Finally, two studies provided examples of international students' resistance, one against racial stereotypes (Matters et al., 2022) and the other against the superficial categorisation of international students as a homogeneous group (Koehne, 2005).

Conclusions

Studies on international students' activism and/or resistance are very scarce, although a growing interest in this topic has been evident recently. Perspectives from Education are predominant, which may explain the reliance on qualitative methodologies and on various Social Sciences theories/concepts. The involvement of international students in activism and resistance initiatives – practices revealing their agency (Deuchar, 2022) – is addressed from two perspectives: a political/sociological perspective related to contestation and the fight for rights/freedoms and an educational perspective related to

international students' resistance to institutionalised norms and practices, creating unequal power relations. There is ample room to develop these research strands, as well as how international students position themselves regarding current global challenges.

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