

(Un)Making knowledge: towards cognitive justice in international higher education

Vera Spangler

University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This article examines how internationalisation in higher education (HE) shapes processes of knowledge production, drawing on ethnographic research conducted in the UK, Denmark, and Germany. It addresses macro-level issues of knowledge, power, and global hierarchies by analysis of the micro-level experiences of international students and lecturers. Through comparative analysis of six master's cohorts, the study explores how different educational environments facilitate or constrain student collaboration, openness to diverse epistemologies, and critical reflexivity regarding power asymmetries. The paper highlights the need for academic institutions to move beyond assimilationist expectations of international students and instead recognise their potential to challenge and transform established practices. The research contributes to ongoing debates about how internationalisation might be reimagined to foster more inclusive and pluralistic educational spaces.

Full paper

Introduction

For several years now, critical perspectives on the development and current orientation of internationalisation have emerged (e.g., Mwangi et al., 2018; Stein et al., 2016), expressing concern about the risk of reproducing already uneven global hierarchies through mainstream internationalisation activities, particularly in institutions of the Global North and Western/ised HE institutions. Scholars and practitioners in the field of HE studies caution that as institutions grow more interconnected, without a redistribution of power and resources or a reimagining of traditional relationships, existing inequalities in the already uneven global HE landscape may be further exacerbated (Lund et al., 2022; Stein, 2019). There is increasing concern that dominant approaches to internationalisation may further entrench colonialist, capitalist global relations, and reinforce the Eurocentric foundations of modern Western HE (see also Bamberger & Morris, 2024).

As internationalisation expands, it presents both a complex opportunity and an ethical obligation to engage in this critical inquiry. Recognising that Eurocentrism and global dominance persist within Western universities, it is essential to examine the factors that sustain these challenges. Drawing on 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted across the UK, Denmark, and Germany, this paper investigates the everyday dynamics of knowledge production and negotiation within internationalised classrooms. The study addresses macro-level issues of knowledge, power, and global hierarchies as they manifest in the micro-level experiences of international students and lecturers. It explores how classroom practices and pedagogies across the three sites shape the potential of internationalisation by bringing together diverse ways of knowing.

Theoretically, the study conceptualises the 'international classroom' as a dynamic meeting point where diverse educational trajectories and knowledges converge, shaping the everyday negotiation of legitimacy (Spangler & Adriansen, 2021). It draws on de Sousa Santos' (2014) concept of an 'ecology of knowledges' to critically engage with the possibilities and limits of epistemic diversity in Western HE institutions. Acknowledging the persistence of global power asymmetries (Stein, 2017), the analysis interrogates the extent to which pedagogic spaces can act as sites of cognitive justice, where multiple knowledges are valued.

Rethinking knowledge production in international HE

This paper shows how pedagogic spaces across internationalised classrooms can both reproduce and unsettle dominant epistemic hierarchies, shaped through the dynamic interplay between institutional structures, lecturers' practices, and students' own trajectories, engagements, and ways of knowing. Seemingly mundane classroom moments can become critical sites of knowledge negotiation, reinforcement, or omission. The analysis identifies clear national and institutional differences in how such dynamics unfold. In Germany, a more inclusive pedagogical orientation was often reflected in efforts to adapt teaching to diverse student needs. Lecturers invited international students to shape seminar directions, fostering collaborative engagement and reflexivity. This flexibility was supported by institutional structures that afforded greater academic freedom. In contrast, UK lecturers worked within the constraints of a marketised HE system, where rigid course outlines and institutional branding limited opportunities for pedagogic responsiveness. Meanwhile, Denmark's educational system, often seen as progressive and egalitarian (see Frønes et al., 2020), masked subtle expectations of cultural adaptation, limiting openness to epistemic plurality.

Conclusion

A key implication of this study is the need to move beyond superficial diversity initiatives and reimagine pedagogy as a site of epistemic engagement and transformation (Stein, 2025). This requires institutions and lecturers to actively question dominant knowledge

systems and reflect on whose perspectives are legitimised in the classroom. The German context offers suggestive practices - collaborative syllabus design, student-led discussions, and recognition of diverse positionalities - but these remain relatively rare. A wider commitment to cognitive justice would demand structural changes not only in how courses are taught, but also in how curricula are shaped, which epistemologies are legitimised, and how authority and voice are negotiated. Drawing on de Sousa Santos' (2014) call for an ecology of knowledges, this paper advocates for pedagogies that foster pluralistic and dialogic academic spaces, repositioning Western knowledge as one perspective among many (R'boul, 2022; Rogers, 2018). By analysing everyday practices within internationalised classroom, the study illuminates how power and knowledge circulate in HE settings and reflects critically on the possibilities and limits of more inclusive educational practices.