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Reflecting on Critical Considerations for Research with International Students as a Subfield

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Our upcoming edited volume *Research with International Students: Critical Conceptual and Methodological Considerations* (published open access by Routledge in 2023) aims to provide comprehensive methodological guidance for researchers who include international students as participants. Our interest in developing this book stems from recognition within the Critical Internationalisation Studies Network that research with international students is a disparate subfield that operates under several problematic assumptions, which we highlight below. The book includes 26 chapters from global authors, many of whom are active within this network. In this paper, we wish to delineate why we believe this book is necessary and encourage ongoing discussion about how research on this topic can be made more ethical, critical, and equitable.

In the last few decades, the exponential growth of international students has led to increased scholarly interest in wide-ranging factors associated with their experiences and contributions. Significant areas of interdisciplinary research now focus on international students' academic transitions, social interactions, and intersectional lived experiences. One might argue that research about international students is a subfield of a subfield: sitting within the internationalisation branch of higher education studies. Previous systematic reviews show the ways that the wider internationalisation umbrella has expanded in focus: 2,300 articles reviewed by Kuzhabekova et al. (2015) and more than 200 articles per year highlighted by Tight (2021). Systematic reviews of internationalisation research also show that research about international students makes a significant thematic contribution which has grown substantially over time (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016; 2015; Yemini & Sagie, 2016) and continues to attract new researchers, including increasing interest from postgraduate researchers (Montgomery, 2019). However, the subfield remains disparate and there have been limited attempts to systematically review known evidence about supporting international students across the subfield, despite decades of research (although there have been reviews on limited subsets within this area, as we [highlight on our website](#): e.g., Lee & Bligh, 2019; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021; Pham et al., 2021).

Although there is significant interest in this topic, there is presently limited conceptual and methodological guidance specifically for *researchers* (rather than teachers) who conduct their

work with and about international students. We argue that this situation means there are several issues that remain pervasive in this research area. First, research about international students has historically operated from positions of deficit (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021), as they are often assumed to lack experiences or skills necessary for success, particularly compared to home students. International students are frequently portrayed in research as only experiencing challenges or difficulties, which fails to account for the complexity of their multidimensional experiences. For example, the subfield is rife with research that seeks to fix perceived problems with international students' believed lack of critical thinking, language proficiency, classroom participation, or referencing knowledge.

We argue, and we aim for our book to highlight, that such approaches fail to engage with more transformative reflections on what has been called 'academic hospitality' (see Ploner, 2018): the reciprocity between academic institutions as 'hosts' and international students as respected 'guests'. Such approaches also fail to view international students as 'epistemic equals' (Hayes, 2019) whose knowledges and experiences are equally worthy of inclusion rather than erasure. In short, we argue that many of the ideological purposes for international student mobility outlined through institutional discourses - of meaningful mutual exchange and intercultural pedagogic transformation - are not reflected in the epistemologies and conceptualisations of research on students' experiences.

Research with international students also routinely leaves them othered (Moosavi, 2021) or stereotyped (Heng, 2018) through assumptions that they should assimilate to the cultures and practices of their hosts. International students' identities are often presented in limited ways, failing to engage with how their migrant student status intersects with, for example, gender, race, disability, or class to impact experiences abroad (although members of this network have made great efforts to actively work against this - see, for example, recent work by Yao & George Mwangi, 2022). Scholars have, thus, critiqued that research in this subfield does not always critically engage with issues of power, inequality, and ethics (George Mwangi et al., 2018), which are foundational for understanding students' experiences within unequal environments. As such, we believe that there is greater need for practical suggestions and reflection points for developing more critical and intersectional approaches to research *with* (not just *about*) international students. Even the very definition of 'international student' (Jones, 2017) should be critically interrogated for and through our research methodologies.

Research methodologies also frequently limit their ambition and innovation, as repetitive findings about international students fail to challenge intrinsic inequalities and epistemic injustices. The plethora of exploratory research that vaguely focuses on 'experiences' highlights this characteristic (Deuchar, 2022) through small-scale studies that often over-rely only on 'semi-structured interviews'. Research with international students similarly remains under-theorised and often fails to critically define or reflect on key underpinning concepts (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021), such as 'experience'. As a result, much research about international students remains limited in scope, ambition, and criticality.

Given the aforementioned common limitations of research with international students, we argue that the subfield should be putting more effort into creating methodological resources which specifically address considerations for research with and about international students. The framing of our upcoming book is intended as a start to this conversation, developed to reflect burgeoning issues of critical internationalisation studies and the ways that research on this topic has often been

framed problematically. However, we hope for more scope generally within the subfield for reflecting on how research methodologies align with the critical conceptual questions that are being raised about internationalisation. We ask, therefore: How can research methodologies and designs reflect the conceptual criticality we seek in research with international students?

Research with International Students is expected to be published open access by Routledge in late 2023. In the meantime, the authors are continually developing free online resources to support more critical research with international students, available at: <https://researchintlstudents.com/>

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