

INTRODUCTION

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The idea for this book started with a simple observation: there is a lot of research produced about international students, and much of it is not very good. This was initially an informal observation, which was later substantiated through several systematic reviews developed across various projects (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2023; Mittelmeier et al., 2022; Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022). Along the way, we started creating online resources to support better research designs, which organically garnered attention from fellow scholars. This edited volume formalises and builds upon that work by bringing together 49 critical researchers to form a collective scholarly critique of existing research, pushing forward new agendas for the future of research with international students as a subfield within higher education studies. We met throughout the writing process, both in our editorial team and as larger consortiums of authors, to discuss and dream about what that future might contain.

Research with international students makes an important contribution to higher education studies – the broader research field¹ which focuses on higher education as a site of study – because international students are a significant group at many institutions. The OECD, for example, estimates that there are currently over five million students who are studying across borders for higher education (OECD, 2023), numbers which have grown exponentially in recent decades. Historically, migration flows have favoured institutions in Anglophone countries, particularly countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. One reason is that international student mobility is often influenced by colonial legacies and historically extractive international relationships (Perraton, 2020). Yet, mobility between countries in what has been called the ‘Global South’ or ‘Global Majority’ is also a rising trend, where countries such as China, Turkey, Brazil, and South Africa have

become hubs (Kondakçi et al., 2018). The prevalence of international students in higher education is, therefore, a global phenomenon, despite tendencies to assume particular directions of travel.

International students' growing presence has led to an interdisciplinary subfield of research which seeks to understand, unpack, and problematize their experiences and contributions (summarised in brief in Chapter 2). A recent scientometric review of research with international students identified over 3,600 published articles with a 'rapid development phase' since 2006 (Jing et al., 2020). Research with international students is also a growing topic of postgraduate research, often led by international students as researchers themselves (Montgomery, 2019).

Yet, although research on this topic is prolific, it is a subfield that is imperfect and flawed, held back by conceptual and methodological limitations. Research, often unintentionally, has a tendency to dehumanise and stereotype international students (as outlined in Section 2). We collectively hold our own prior research up to these criticisms, recognising the pervasiveness of deficit thinking about international students.

One challenge is that, before this book, there has been limited attention to research with international students *as a subfield*, with very few reflections on interdisciplinary issues about research processes and approaches with this specific population. This book is our answer to that by being, to our knowledge, the first targeted resource for researchers who include international students as participants or co-researchers in their work. We believe it is an essential starting point for developing new research designs on this topic.

The focus of this book: critical research with international students

International students form one part of the wider internationalisation and globalisation of higher education. Research about internationalisation has been plentiful, with thousands of articles published in recent decades (Tight, 2021). Within this, researchers have theorised, analysed, and debated the contributions and purposes (or lack thereof) of the varied approaches institutions take to internationalise their operations (e.g., Marginson, 2006; Mok, 2007; Rizvi, 2019). Scholars have both attempted to define (e.g., Hudzik, 2014; Knight, 2004) and, then, subsequently, critiqued existing definitions (e.g., Buckner & Stein, 2020; Marginson, 2022) of what internationalisation means, how it operates, and what it assumes. While internationalisation provides an important context and background for this book, it is not our intention to contribute to ongoing theorisations of broader internationalisation projects. For that, we refer readers to other volumes in this series or to the reading lists provided on our companion website: <https://researchintlstudents.com/reading-lists/>.

This book, instead, purposefully centres on the subfield of empirical research that focuses specifically on international students. International students are one example of internationalisation in practice, but such terms should not be conflated. Research with international students may take many forms, but most commonly refers to research which includes international students as participants and/or focuses on their experiences, behaviours, attitudes, outcomes, and/or preferences in higher education. We focus on the *process* – the conceptual framings, methodologies, and methods – of how research with international students is designed and developed. In doing so, we evaluate and critique how existing studies have tended to problematically frame and approach international students.

One of the more difficult things about writing a book about research with international students is defining ‘international student’. There are, after all, many conflicting national approaches to this definition (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2023), all of which tend to centre visa status without recognising the complexity of individual identities and how people may relate in different ways to ‘difference’ (Rizvi & Walsh, 1998) or ‘international’ (Jones, 2017). Many of our own personal migration histories serve as good examples of this complexity. Therefore, we have chosen not to provide a universal definition of ‘international student’ for this book. We have, rather, given this task to a collection of scholars who *are* international students, who have written in great depth in Chapter 1 about the importance of and challenges with defining this student population. We argue that there is no single definition that makes sense for all places, but it is nonetheless essential for researchers to start their work by reflecting purposefully on this when situating their research designs within their own contexts.

We have also emphasised ‘critical research’ in this volume but recognise that this term is often flung around broadly. In using the word ‘critical’, we are not talking about Critical Theory in the Frankfurt School sense, although some of those intellectual influences are probably evident. Nor do we solely mean ‘being negative’ or finding out all the problems (although we do some of this, too). Instead, we aimed to question *why* certain assumptions, norms, and trends in research with international students dominate and *who benefits*. We wanted this book to challenge established norms and question in whose interests these norms function, and who is marginalised or sidelined in that process. We see critical scholarship as that which problematises and overturns the power dynamics present in research with international students.

We have defined our task as exploring research *with* international students, not *on* or *about*, because talking about research *on* international students maintains the exploitative dynamic of the researcher extracting information from the research ‘subject’. We wanted to undermine this assumption and look, instead, at how international students are scholars themselves, how we/they take agency as knowledge creators, and how research that positions

international students as partners has greater critical potential. This not only is more ethical, in that it is less exploitative, but also has more capacity to generate relevant, interesting, and meaningful knowledge. For this reason, we have included the voices of current and former international students as authors throughout the book.

It is important to state plainly that this book is not a how-to guide. There is (purposefully) no prescribed recipe or formula within its pages for designing the ‘best’ research design with international students. Rather, we provide a set of critical provocations and suggestions in the hopes that readers will take it to the next step by embedding the issues raised into their own research designs, or debating them further where they may disagree.

Complexities and tensions within this book

This book features 49 authors who represent a great diversity of research disciplines, backgrounds and identities, personal migration stories, and current working contexts. For that reason, we recognise that there are complexities and tensions regarding any shared vision of the subfield, due in part to the varying conceptual traditions our work derives from and the discourses we use. We have decided to embrace this rather than attempt to make our ideas uniform. Rather, reflexivity is the common thread running through the critical stances in each chapter.

From the resultant flowering of contradictions, we came to the sobering realisation that simultaneously addressing the myriad concerns with research practices, conceptual underpinnings, and unstated normative framings may be an unrealistic aim. This particularly applies to this book as it builds on a set of propositions that are inevitably subject to review and revision over time. We hope that the book serves as an essential starting point for these discussions and equally that the subfield may eventually develop beyond the book’s original purpose.

This means we cannot imply that the volume exhausts all the possibilities of critical imaginations. For instance, as widely dispersed as our network of contributors is, aspirations of reach and representation are tempered by facts of structural imbalance in knowledge creation and English as the sole language of our writing. To partially address the latter, we have invited authors to adopt spellings and phrasings relevant to their context, meaning that there is purposeful variation in style and terminology across chapters. Whether the former is addressed is contingent on the extent to which readers feel encouraged to probe the worldviews which underwrite and are buttressed by their endeavours. At the same time, we recognise this is the start of a conversation which needs more voices in more languages, which we hope readers will continue to develop.

One other point of contention is grappling with the flattening of real-world complexity which occurs when we deploy terms such as ‘Global North’,

‘Global South’, and even ‘international student’. We particularly recognise the problematic complexity and geographic inaccuracy of terms such as ‘Western’, ‘Eastern’, ‘Northern’, or ‘Southern’. However, many authors have used such phrases variably across chapters in reflection of their common use in the literature in their discipline. We invite readers to consider their own uses of such terms in their work through the ‘anti-glossary’ developed on our companion site: <https://researchintlstudents.com/anti-glossary/>.

Chapter and book format

This book has five sections, which follow the typical progression of research development:

- **Section 1** starts by considering the context and background of existing research with international students, answering the question: how is current research positioned? This section encourages readers to consider how international students are defined (Chapter 1) and the history of the subfield (Chapter 2).
- **Section 2** shifts to the epistemological foundations of existing research with international students, questioning: what currently inhibits critical research? This considers issues of dehumanisation (Chapter 3), stereotyping (Chapter 4), Othering (Chapter 5), coloniality (Chapter 6), and deficit narratives (Chapter 7) currently embedded in the subfield.
- **Section 3** encourages readers to consider how research can develop more intersectional depictions of international students (Chapter 8), focusing on the intersections of migrant student status with race (Chapter 9), disability (Chapter 10), LGBTQ+ identities (Chapter 11), gender (Chapter 12), and class (Chapter 13). While not comprehensive of the varied identities international students hold, this section questions: how understandings of international students can be made more complex?
- **Section 4** considers conceptual and theoretical framings of key topics in research with international students, asking: what concepts might be reconsidered? Readers are encouraged to evaluate previously taken-for-granted concepts such as global (Chapter 14), mobilities (Chapter 15), transitions (Chapter 16), language (Chapter 17), culture (Chapter 18), and intercultural relationships (Chapter 19).
- **Section 5**, finally, focuses on research methods and methodologies, considering: how research can be designed better? Here, readers can consider issues of researcher positionality (Chapter 20), decolonial research designs and ethics (Chapter 21), co-designed research approaches (Chapter 22), voice in qualitative data (Chapter 23), social constructs in quantitative data (Chapter 24), multilingual approaches (Chapter 25), and writing about international students (Chapter 26).

The book includes 26 short chapters in total, each about 3,000 words. We have designed it so readers can dip in and dip out, as relevant to their research design process and personal interests. However, there is value in reading the book as a whole, particularly as chapters and ideas speak to one another.

Chapters are structured to reflect on both conceptual and practical considerations for research. Each chapter includes the following:

- **Critical considerations** which provide conceptual critiques and ideas on the chapter topic in relation to current literature
- **Reflection questions** for researchers to consider how the critiques raised in the chapter relate to their own research
- **Suggestions for researchers** for developing more critical research designs
- **Examples in practice** where authors have provided a reading which demonstrates their critiques well either through further conceptual reflection or in their research design

Companion website

We see developing research with international students as an ongoing, living conversation. Beyond this book, the conversation continues on our companion website: <https://researchintlstudents.com/>.

This website is frequently updated with new resources, including reading lists, a theoretical framework bank, research design ideas, an ‘anti-glossary’ of terms, and many others. We also host a blog and post recorded video lectures from scholars on the website, where we invite readers to contribute, should reading this book spark new ideas and debates. We have, for that reason, not written a formal conclusion for the book so that readers may draw their own.

Note

1 We note that there are debates about whether higher education studies is a ‘field’ or a ‘discipline’ (Tight, 2020).

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