

Engaging Students in International Education: Rethinking Student Engagement in a Globalized World

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This Special Issue draws on new ways of thinking about student engagement, which position students as active, critical, and agentic contributors to all aspects of university life. Collectively, the articles which make up this Issue provide a glimpse into the myriad ways in which students can contribute imaginatively, passionately, and critically to global learning. At the same time, they challenge universities to intentionally foster students' engagement and to address the reasons why students disengage from the process of internationalization.

For more than a decade, “student engagement” has been quite a hot topic in higher education policy, research, and practice. While there is little agreement about what defines “engagement,” it is typically characterized by students’ “vigour, dedication and absorption” in their learning together with a sense of belonging to their learning communities (Baron & Corbin, 2012, p. 763). Conversely, disengagement is associated with a “surface” approach to learning (Trowler, 2010), alienation, and a lack of community spirit on campus (McInnis & Hartley, 2002). A comprehensive literature review commissioned by the United Kingdom’s Higher Education Academy found strong correlations between students’ engagement and their academic success, development, and well-being (Trowler, 2010).

The concept of engagement has much to offer the field of international education. Ideally, universities provide *all* of their students with opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, and attributes that will prepare them for life and work in our globalized world. “Global learning”—which I will define for our purposes here as learning to live and work effectively and ethically in our interconnected and interdependent world—is an “ontoepistemological” (Barad, 2003) undertaking; it involves students and teachers alike in “‘disorienting dilemmas,’ which lead to altered perspectives” (Jones, 2013, p. 100). It requires us to be open to personal and structural transformation because it asks us to become “critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world” and to engage in changing these structures (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167). In short, global learning through an internationalized curriculum (Leask, 2015) calls for deep, even radical engagement—behaviorally, emotionally and intellectually. Yet, to date, little

attention has been given to how students themselves engage with and contribute to opportunities for global learning at university (Green & Whitsed, 2015).

How do students, with their diverse interests, life experiences, languages, and cultures, make sense of their lecturers' efforts to internationalize the curriculum? How are students contributing—and prevented from contributing—to the challenging process of global learning? What does their active engagement in internationalization mean? From students' diverse perspectives, what fosters and what blocks their active engagement in global learning? This Special Issue addresses these questions by considering how a *critical* consideration of “student engagement” could shape the conceptualization and practice of the internationalization of higher education.

Emphasis is necessarily placed on the word *critical* here. It is worth noting that much of the student engagement research and policy has assumed a *lack* of student engagement to be the problem. Discussion about student engagement tends to “quickly degenerate into deficit views of students who are not doing what they should be doing” (Matthews, 2016, p. 1). Opposing this deficit perspective, Baron and Corbin (2012) argue that institutional attempts to measure and foster engagement actually disengage students, when they produce generalizations across broad groups but shed little light on experiences of subgroups or individuals. If we want to understand how and why different students engage or disengage, we need to understand their various experiences, desires, interests, and imaginings for their futures. As Rizvi (2017, np) observes,

If we assume that all human beings are naturally inquisitive, motivated and interested then should we not be asking the question of what it is that higher education institutions do that makes them bored, dispassionate, disaffected, or otherwise disengaged? . . . The key question should no longer be whether students are interested or engaged—this much should be taken for granted—but how, and under what terms . . . [S]tudent engagement is never culturally neutral but expresses different ethical values and academic traditions.

This Special Issue draws attention to new work on student engagement and explores how it might shape internationalization. Various terms “students as co-producers,” “students as change agents,” or “students as partners,” these collaborative and generative approaches suggest a powerful—and quite radical—challenge to the neoliberal paradigm. As Elisabeth Dunne (in Dunne & Zandstra, 2011) explains,

There is a subtle, but extremely important, difference between an institution that “listens” to students and responds accordingly, and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required changes. The concept of “listening to the student voice”—implicitly if not deliberately—supports the perspective of student as “consumer,” whereas “students as change agents” explicitly supports a view of the student as “active collaborator” and “co-producer,” with the potential for transformation. (p. 4)

Engaging students (as partners) in internationalization means involving them “in the entire process of the production of knowing,” rather than “simply consuming the final product of someone else’s labor” (Neary, 2010, p. 6). According to Bovill, Bulley,

and Morss (2011) engagement through “a transformational process of increasing ownership and control of the learning process” is synonymous with empowerment (p. 198). Thus, “engagement” empowers students to contribute “at the heart of the university, as a source of cultural capital and intentional diversity” (Jones & Brown, 2007, p. 2).

Collectively, the articles in this Issue explore how students engage with and express their engagement in the opportunities for intercultural learning in today’s multicultural, globally connected universities. The first three articles to address these questions were developed in the context of my Australian Learning and Teaching Fellowship, titled “Engaging Students as Partners in Global Learning.” This Fellowship enabled me to bring together students and academics (faculty) from diverse disciplinary, cultural, and national backgrounds to co-develop rich global learning experiences in the formal and informal curriculum in four Australian universities. The first article, “Engaging Students as Partners in Global Learning: Some Possibilities and Provocations” provides an overview of the Fellowship, distills the elements of successful ethical staff–student partnerships, and unpacks a number of provocations, which need to be addressed by universities if they intend to engage students in sustainable ethical partnerships in global learning.

Many of the 13 student–staff partnerships involved in the Fellowship were keen to represent their work in this Issue. In the end, two articles, in addition to my own, have been selected for inclusion here. These in no way capture the richness and ingenuity of the “Students as Partners” (SaP) work undertaken throughout the Fellowship; however, they are indicative of what student–staff partnerships in global learning can achieve. In “Tensions and Rewards: Behind the Scenes in a Cross-Cultural Student Staff Partnership,” Bonnie Stanway, Yiyuan Cao, Tony Cannell, and Yihui Gu discuss how they engaged students as partners “at home,” to address the needs and interests of Chinese international students in an Australian university business school. Stanway and her colleagues embedded WeChat, the social media platform popular with Chinese students, in a postgraduate learning module to form a cross-cultural bridge to better connect academics and learning support staff with their Chinese international students. Although their initial intervention was “modest and targeted,” it has since inspired a number of related projects in their university, as the authors explain in their epilog. In “Transformative learning through international project-based learning in the global south: Applying a students-as-partners lens to a ‘high-impact’ capstone”, Tracy Fortune, Shinead Borkovic, Anoo Bhojti, Renee Somoza, Nhan Ha Chan and Shabnam Rangwala discuss a more ambitious student-staff partnership: the development of Australian university students as global citizens through internships abroad. In this program, the students worked in a partnership with not only academics but also community health leaders in regions that have been referred to as the “global south” (Connell, 2007). The article focuses primarily on the students’ experiences, finding that they initially struggled with the perception by others of being “all knowing” by virtue of their Australian university education, and the difficulties they had in applying their “global north” knowledge in community-based settings in the global South.

Despite the challenges, the insights gained by the students into their own and others' personal/professional worldviews demonstrate the value of extending the concept of partnership into learning abroad programs.

The next three articles explore how students develop agency in very challenging contexts. Students from two Israeli teacher education colleges serving marginalized communities is the focus of "Students Shaping Internationalisation in a Conflict-Ridden Society: Experiences of Israeli Teacher Education College" by Miri Yemini, Olzan Goldstein, Nazeh Natur, and Sheila Trahar. Yemini and colleagues show how students effectively shaped institutional internationalization processes in Israel, not only during their studies but also, post-graduation, in their teaching careers. Their analysis sheds light on how students' agency in internationalization can be shaped by conflict and its consequences, and how conflict may prompt proactivity and agency among marginalized students. In their article, "Catalyzing Cultural and Global Competencies: Engaging Preservice Teachers in Study Abroad to Expand the Agency of Citizenship," Erik Byker and S. Michael Putman apply critical cosmopolitan theory to explore the development of American education students' agency during their experience abroad in South Africa. Their study shows how study abroad programs can inspire students to "take action" as citizens and future teachers if their experiences connect with, and challenge their perceptions of what it means to teach. In "Engaging Underrepresented International Students as Partners: Agency and Constraints Among Rwandan Students in the U.S.," Aryn Baxter explores this same theme of students' agency in a different context. She engages with Rwandan scholarship recipients studying in the United States to better understand their lived experiences and co-construct supports for navigating the opportunities and constraints that accompany their mobility. Drawing on spatial and transnational theories, Baxter's work elucidates how students who cross national borders in the pursuit of education make sense of their transnational experiences, when their complex, often conflict-ridden histories, allegiances, and identities "are ever-present."

The next two articles focus on international doctoral students as co-producers of global learning. In "Surfacing 'Southern' Knowledge on Student Engagement With Internationalization: Doctoral Theses as Sources of Learning," Catherine Montgomery analyzes how doctoral theses on internationalization construct "Southern knowledge" (Connell, 2007). Montgomery's research indicates that while the doctoral theses produced by international students generate some new perspectives on methodological and thematic constructions of internationalization, they also reproduce Western knowledge. Her analysis highlights how entrenched disciplinary hierarchies of knowledge may be limiting the potential for postcolonial encounters through the PhD to generate perspectives on internationalization, which are relevant to the students' own country contexts. In contrast, the second article on this theme, written predominantly by Chinese international doctoral students, demonstrates their capacity for engaging in reciprocal intercultural learning with their fellow students and supervisors. "Negotiating Scholarly Identity Through a Cosmopolitan Lens: Voices From a Cohort of Chinese Doctoral Candidates in Education," by Huajun Zhang, Guanglan Mu, Wei Cheng, Yangyang Fang, Shuguang Li, Xiangxu Wang, and Karen Dooley focuses on Chinese

students' participation in a doctoral workshop in Australia. Describing their participation as "identity projects," the authors explain how they created "an academic space for the west to better understand the transnational experiences of Chinese doctoral students, so that the west and the east can work collaborative and move toward a culturally inclusive and multiculturally appropriate doctoral pedagogy."

The final two articles consider undergraduates engagement in internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) in two countries: Vietnam and Australia. In 'Student Engagement in Internationalisation of the Curriculum: Vietnamese domestic students' perspectives', Anh Ngoc Trinh and Lyndsey Conner explore students' engagement in internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) from the perspectives of domestic Vietnamese students taking an internationalised program in a Vietnamese university. Framed by Kahu's (2013) model of student engagement, the authors shed light on the way these students engaged in IoC, and the diverse internal and external factors which fostered or limited that engagement, including their awareness of the benefits of their engagement in the program, their acknowledgment of the program's strengths and weaknesses, as well as their desire to be more actively engaged as partners in the program. Trinh and Conner concluded that students are underrecognized resources for developing IoC in internationalized programs in Vietnam, and that their engagement "as partners" could offer multiple insights and possibilities to enhance IoC. The final article in this Special Issue compares students' experiences of engagement in Australia and Vietnam. In "Internationalisation, Student Engagement and Global Graduates: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Australian Students' Experience," Huong Le Thanh Phan, Ly Thi Tran, and Jill Blackmore explore how local arrangements for curriculum internationalization in Australia and Vietnam both enable and constrain students' agency as they learn to become skilful and culturally sensitive professionals and citizens. The article provides important comparative perspectives on how students' experience of participating in curriculum internationalization shapes and is shaped by their local contexts.

Read singly and together, these articles significantly extend current understandings of students' engagement and agency in the process of global learning. Each article is based on the assumption that students' engagement is not universal and neutral, but rather, it develops in specific family, cultural, geopolitical, and academic contexts. Notably, each article takes an explorative and predominantly qualitative approach to researching engagement. Critics have observed for some time that engagement research too often generalizes findings from large data sets. The problem with relying on a "single wide-angled snapshot" is that we miss "much of the complexity of the construct: engagement is both dynamic and situational . . . [Surveys] obscure the participant voice [and any] perspective that does not fit the predefined questions" (Kahu, 2013, p. 760). Right now, we need to make greater use of qualitative and longitudinal methodologies to enrich and contextualize our understanding of the ways in which students engage and disengage from (global) learning (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Department of Education Science and Training [DEST], 2005; Kahu, 2013). The various qualitative approaches taken in this Issue, such as narrative inquiry, discourse analysis, collective biography, and ethnography, together with some mixed methods

demonstrate the value of extending the methodological repertoire of engagement researchers. Collectively, we hope this Special Issue not only extends our understanding of student engagement in global learning as a complex, dynamic, and contextualized phenomenon but also inspires further qualitative exploration and a commitment to conducting longitudinal studies.

Also shared by the Issue's contributing authors is the conviction that student engagement is the joint responsibility of students, staff, and their institutions. As I argue in the first article, engaging students as agentic partners in global learning poses a number of provocations that need to be addressed at the institutional level. Empowering students as agentic contributors to global learning will call into question many naturalized practices of universities, particularly those concerning hierarchies of knowledge, access and equity, outcomes and process, and power and privilege. Each of the following articles stresses the need for greater institutional responsibility for engagement, albeit from different theoretical and geocultural perspectives. Stanway and colleagues, reporting on one of the 13 pilot projects supported by my Fellowship, show how a small-scale project, piloted, evaluated, and disseminated, can successfully engage students and staff in larger scale projects across the institution. In their case, similar partnerships have commenced in other areas of their university, including international student support services, peer support programs, noncredit bearing language and literacy courses, and library services. Importantly, they add, university management is discussing "the potential and politics" of this approach. Hopefully, these discussions will lead to sustainable, strategic approaches to student engagement in internationalization. Not all articles end on such a hopeful note. Many of the articles point to a range of institutional and disciplinary blockers to student engagement in internationalization. For example, Montgomery concludes that the co-production of new "Southern" knowledge "is a collective intellectual process which would involve not just individual doctoral supervisors but the whole academy in rethinking the status of doctoral knowledge." Baxter's study indicates how universities might better engage with students if they develop deeper and more sensitive understandings of the diversity of international students' spatial imaginaries. Phan and colleagues use the concept of "practice architectures," as I do, to explore the blockers and potential enablers of required structural change.

This Special Issue set out to explore new ways of conceptualizing, researching, and practicing student engagement in international education. By illustrating, in various ways, the capacity of students to contribute intelligently, responsibly, and creatively to global learning, this Issue challenges us to undertake the personal and structural changes necessary to foster such engagement. My hope is that we, the staff, and students who contributed to this Special Issue have inspired you to—in the words of Betty Leask (2015)—"reflect, imagine, plan, enact and evaluate" new possibilities for student engagement wherever you work and learn.

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