Conceptualizing micro-level internationalization from empirical and conceptual constructs: adding the human dimension

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Abstract

This Special Issue explores 'micro-level' internationalization' using individual narratives as a conceptual framework for examining different dimensions of engagement in internationalization. It sheds light on the human dimension through the unrecognised and unintended positive and negative impacts of internationalization policies and practices at international, national and institutional levels. It addresses the gap in current knowledge through 10 empirical studies and 2 conceptual frameworks using diverse methodological approaches that have been written by both researchers and practitioners in a wide range of global contexts. It advances a conceptualization of micro-level internationalization through five dimensions of Mobility, Transformational Learning, Development, Context, and Conceptual Framing.
Thus, micro-level internationalization offers a new lens to explore the human experience of internationalisation and provides an opportunity and call for action for better policy decisions and improvement of practice that can lead to an enhanced experience for all those involved.

Este número especial explora la internacionalización a "nivel micro" utilizando narrativas individuales como marco conceptual para examinar diferentes dimensiones de la participación en la internacionalización. Arroja luz sobre la dimensión humana a través de los impactos positivos y negativos no reconocidos e imprevistos de las políticas y prácticas de internacionalización a nivel internacional, nacional e institucional.Aborda la brecha en el conocimiento actual a través de 10 estudios empíricos y 2 marcos conceptuales utilizando diversos enfoques metodológicos que han sido escritos tanto por investigadores como por profesionales en una amplia gama de contextos globales. Promueve una conceptualización de la internacionalización a nivel micro a través de cinco dimensiones de movilidad, aprendizaje transformacional, desarrollo, contexto y marco conceptual. Por lo tanto, la internacionalización a nivel micro ofrece una nueva perspectiva para explorar la experiencia humana de la internacionalización, y brinda una oportunidad y un llamado a la acción para tomar mejores decisiones políticas y mejorar la práctica para conducir a una mejor experiencia para todos los involucrados.

This Special Issue

We were delighted that the open call and invitation to contribute to a special issue on 'micro-level internationalization' resonated with many across the globe, leading to over 70 submissions. For a year, the papers went through three stages of rigorous and systematic peer review. Initial submissions of 500-word proposals were subject to double peer review by the Special Issue editors, in line with the criteria listed in the call for papers. A total of 25 papers were selected at this stage, with authors invited to submit full papers for the Special Issue(SI). The full papers were subject to between 2 to 4 blind peer reviews, leading to15 papers being selected. After a third and final round of double peer review, we proudly present the 12 papers selected for this Special Issue. We gratefully acknowledge the work of the reviewers, and the support from the Editor-in-Chief throughout this process.

The papers in this SI provide rich and insightful glimpses into research and work in different global contexts through individual narratives and theoretical postulations. The keen interest in the SI speaks to the longstanding omission of a conceptual framing of these individual conceptions in discursive texts that did not necessarily provide a holistic overview of activities in the field. This raises a crucial point about inclusivity and accessibility, which the SI contributes to addressing in the call for papers. The open call enabled submissions from scholars, academics, practitioners and administrators, addressing the current lack of explicit publication spaces to connect scholarly research and the work of practitioners. The call was open to all academic career levels from Early Career researchers (ECRs) to more experienced academics. An inclusive and holistic approach to disseminating internationalization research and activities has the potential to offer insights from all contributors to internationalization processes (Fakunle, 2021a), and this informed the inclusive ethos adopted for this SI.

The SI contains twelve papers that provide a range of individual narratives from ten empirical studies and two conceptual frameworks. The empirical studies cover the range of student and staff engagement in different aspects internationalization processes including recruitment, experiential learning and career advancement. These papers adopt a range of epistemological, methodological and theoretical approaches, including, critical qualitative inquiry, phenomenology, constructivist inquiry, intersectionality, autoethnography, narrative inquiry, international student rationales framework, Global South epistemologies, mixed methods, decolonial approaches, and a longitudinal study. The researchers and practitioners originate from countries in different global contexts. The two conceptual papers include a systematic literature review of studies on international student mobility to advance previous theorization, and the presentation of the concept of centrality through a decolonial lens. This editorial paper draws on existing literature and the papers in this issue to advance a conceptualization of micro-level internationalization under the following five dimensions of Mobility, Transformational Learning, Development, Context, and Conceptual Framing.

Introduction

Micro-Level Internationalization as a concept

Longstanding discussions and changing definitions of internationalization continue to explore different dimensions of internationalization in an attempt to capture the diverse rationales and complexities of a constantly evolving phenomenon (de Wit and Altbach, 2021; Fakunle, 2019, 2023; Hunter et al, 2021; Marginson, 2023; Ng, 2012). Yet, there remains the absence of a holistic framework for conceptualizing individual narratives about their engagement in internationalization processes. This Special Issue (SI) aims to address this gap by introducing 'micro-level' internationalization' using individual narratives as a conceptual framework for examining different dimensions of engagement in internationalisation. The micro-

level conceptual framing at the individual level seeks to bring to the fore an oft less discussed, but fundamental point about how the participation and contribution of individuals enable [and sustain] the functioning of internationalization at the institutional, national, and international levels.

A case in point is the lack of evidence as to whether or how international students' rationales for internationalization underpin the development of internationalization strategies (Fakunle, 2021b) The paradox of the visibility of international students in internationalization discourses around student recruitment mainly from economic imperatives has been discussed elsewhere (Fakunle, 2019). This feeds into a persisting neglect of the humanising aspect of internationalization, drowned within dominant neoliberal marketized constructs. Arguably, in the last three decades scholarly observations regarding the conceptual fuzziness and limitations around internationalization definitions (de Wit and Altbach, 2021; Majee, 2020; Marginson, 2023; Teichler, 1999) also reflects the missing voices of individuals at the heart of internationalization.

An explicit focus on the human aspect of internationalization offers the opportunity to expand our understanding about the transformations that internationalization portends in advancing human development and flourishing. This, in turn, offers insights into how these transformations may be actualized, and the challenges overcome. This paper makes a contribution to advance our understanding of the human dimension in internationalization. Accordingly, this introductory editorial paper draws on the extant literature and papers in this Special Issue to inform a conceptualization of micro-level internationalization under five dimensions of Mobility, Transformational Learning, Development, Context, and Conceptual Framing.

Mobility dimension in micro-level internationalization

As is well discussed in the literature, international student mobility (ISM) remains the most visible focus of discourses and policy focus in internationalization studies. This relates largely to data monitoring of ISM as a measure of their economic contributions to host institutions and countries. The quantitative aspect of mobility is well developed in terms of the datafication of student mobility captured in country and international datasets including UNESCO Institute of Statistics, OECD, Higher Education Statistics Agency (UK) and the Institute of International Education Open Doors (USA). The absence of Global South countries in monitoring ISM data is a notable gap and a potential area for future research.

The political aspect of the discourses on ISM reflects governmental immigration policies, which are not under the remit of institutions. This is beyond the scope of this paper. It is, however, worth restating that the current framing of the dominant economic and political discourses does not reflect micro-level voices. Nonetheless, students and staff are central to these discourses. A micro-level framework on mobility can help to bring to the fore what individual participation involves, and how these relate to dominant presentations of internationalization.

The Mobility dimension encapsulates different aspects of individual cross border movements. There is a plethora of research on student mobility exploring wide ranging themes such as, patterns and trends, determinant, issues and rationales, to name a few (Bista, Sharma, & Gaulee, 2018; Choudaha, 2017; de Wit, Ferencz & Rumbley, 2018; Kritz, 2015; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007; Rizvi, 2011; Wei, 2013). The aim of this paper is not to delve into the different themes in existing research on student mobility, as this is covered by existing literature reviews (Gutema, Pant, & Nikou, 2024), although there remains scope for future research to examine the extent to which individual voices are reflected in 'mobility' studies in internationalization. This informs our focus on papers in the SI as examples of individual narratives within a framework of micro-level internationalization.

Accordingly, from the perspectives of students and mentors, the paper by Isiaka and Olaniyan (2024) examines what happens in the pre-mobility phase when potential students are applicants. The responsibility of recruiting international students is usually invested in university marketing departments. Large universities would normally have a dedicated team in their international/global offices dedicated to these recruitment efforts. However, in their paper, Isiaka and Olaniyan capture an underexplored aspect of internationalization by focusing on the activities of international academics who serve as 'virtual mentors' and voluntary and informal cultural liaisons to prospective international students. Having successfully navigated the terrain; these virtual mentors seek to support the mobility intentions of prospective international students. Drawing on McCabe et al.'s, (2010) notion of 'below the radar' agents, their mixed methods study

conducted in the UK used survey and autoethnographic narratives to offer broad understanding and insights from mentees and mentors respectively. The research shows the impact of virtual mentorship on the decision-making processes of international students. Crucially, the mentoring relationship from the mentors (who were former international students in the UK) enabled them to share the cultural knowledge gained within the host society to support prospective students in navigating the system from the early days of considering the choice of institutions. The authors attest to the importance of access to resources to support the provision of competitive bursaries for the mentees.

The analysis of the micro-level narratives from both mentors and mentees demonstrates the hidden processes that contribute to internationalization recruitment work within the institution. This informal structure of virtual mentorship attests to the potential contribution of academics to supporting the early stages of international student recruitment. This proposes a way of envisaging international student recruitment as a humane, transformational and mutually rewarding journey. Overall, putting a spotlight on the role of virtual mentors raises the question of how this largely invisible work captured by a micro-level conceptualization of mobility can be recognized and mainstreamed in internationalization policy at the macro level.

Longitudinal studies are rare in internationalization studies. Siczek's (2024) paper reports the findings of a decade-long study with a constructivist epistemological framework that affords a holistic view of the international student journey. The focus is on two international students from Inner Mongolia, China and Ecuador, and their experiences of studying in the US. The paper highlights their intentions, subsequent experience, and the impact on their personal aspirations and their families. Siczek examines how international student agency drives their self-determination, actions and assessment of the impact of their mobility pre- and post-graduation.

The paper by Siczek highlights how international student mobility is not necessarily one dimensional. Enabled by a 10-year longitudinal study, the paper sheds lights on underpinning rationales for initial mobility in line with the wider literature but goes further to explore a second return to studying again, after leaving the former destination country. The findings provide a rich tapestry of the complexity inherent in the pursuit of international education and the life-changing effect on individuals across multiple points in time. Hence, while the focus is on the construction of student mobility experiences, the paper goes further, problematizing notions of mobility as a linear movement from one national context to another, and within a spatial period of time. Furthermore, echoing Fakunle (2015) the findings problematize the notion of 'home' in a global world, which is a less discussed topic.

Drawing on Siczek's research, we suggest that within a mobility dimension in a micro-level internationalization framework, the concept of an 'international student loop' may offer insights on international student returnees to host destinations. This concept is exemplified by the case of Lora, one of the participants in Siczek's research. Lora can be described as within an 'international student loop'. Her initial study abroad experience in the US and a potential future was interrupted by Covid-19 pandemic, but she returned later as an international student with similar educational and aspirational rationales (Fakunle, 2021b), ostensibly to restart her interrupted dream to live and work in the US. The findings suggest that the underpinning experiential rationale for engaging in international study and the perceived benefits do not abate with the passage of time.

Understanding the micro-level engagement with internationalization processes thus affords a lens for deeper understanding of the phenomenon of returning international students and underpinning factors. Additionally, reflecting previous work, Siczek's paper belies tendency for homogenous grouping of international students within nationality. Student agency was evident throughout the life course of their pedagogical or other encounters. The paper illustrates how international students can develop expanded networks outside their home countries and the dominant home student population. The findings reiterate the transformative growth that international study affords and the challenges that constrain agentic capabilities (Fakunle and Pirrie, 2020; Raby, Singh and Bista, 2023). Echoing other research in this SI, they stress the importance of using a humanizing lens to examine individual micro-level narratives in internationalization. This offers ways to examine how internationalization strategies and initiatives can align with student expectations towards enabling transformative experiences.

Whilst the papers by Isiaka and Olaniyan, and Siczek focus on the more common research interest in mobility from the Global South to the Global North, the third paper discussed in this section by Nyamunda et al (2024) put their attention

on intra-regional mobility, which is less explored in the African context (unlike for example, extensive studies conducted on the European Higher Education Region). Nyamunda et al's paper adopts a phenomenological approach to share insights on ISM from African countries to South Africa. Citing the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), the authors highlight how over one-third of global migration occurs in Global South countries. Their research contributes to addressing gaps around under-theorisation of internationalisation in the global South, and they add to a broader understanding of mobility in international higher education.

The authors combine the concepts of capabilities perspective (Sen, 1999) and Ubuntu philosophy. They focus on critical affiliation to inform a theorisation of a relational framework of interconnectedness to understand human interactions in a different academic environment. They propose Ubuntu affiliation as an approach that encompasses the connectivity and collectivity of a shared humanness to promote human flourishing and inclusivity for all contributors to internationalization activities. The student narratives in their research findings point to the limitations of current normative policy approaches to internationalization that lack the humanistic dimension. The proposed reimagining of internationalization foregrounds the reciprocity of intrinsic and instrumental values recognized by the institutions and the students.

They further suggest the need to recognize and redress existing inequalities that hinder Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) from delivering the support needed by their students, largely from minoritized racial and social communities. Hence, their paper highlights how prevailing educational inequalities in the host country have a significant effect on international students. Although the focus is on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning, the disconnect between policy and student experience is well illustrated in Nyamunda et al's paper. They highlight the implication of a void in internationalization policy and implementation to enhance the international student experience. Their research highlights the real-life ramifications of a lack of understanding mobility at the point of integrating students into a new academic environment, and the impact on their learning experience and potential study outcomes.

Unlike the cross-border feature in the mobility-focused studies discussed so far, Yap's (2024) paper explores opportunities of study away programs within a national context (USA). This further problematizes normative correlation between international mobility and intercultural learning. In this sense, Yap's research highlights student's rich intercultural learnings during a mobility program within a national context.

The disconnect between notions of abroad and local has implications for developing and valuing cultural learning in local contexts. This was evident in Yap's study which examined US students' experience in Hawaiʻi as part of a National Student Exchange (NSE) domestic study away program. The participants from mainland US describe Hawaiʻi as a place that was both familiar and foreign, and so culturally different from their lived experiences that it felt like they were abroad. Study Away thus offers an opportunity for engaging with difference locally. As Yap points out, this has implications for pedagogy, cultural learning and decoloniality.

Yap utilizes a critical qualitative inquiry methodology to critique the dominant research focus on international mobility that involves crossing national borders. By contrast, Yap draws attention to "Study Away" encompassing student mobility within a national context. The paper highlights Anderson's (1983) contention that constructions of 'abroad' are underpinned by assumptions of a nation state. Invariably, this less explored area of student mobility, points to the possibilities inherent in an expanded lens of micro-level framework for analysing international education and student mobility. Yap uses a decolonial lens to problematize the dichotomy in the positioning of the 'abroad' as distinct from the 'local'. This points to the value of study away domestic mobility as a valid, albeit an understudied aspect of engaging with intercultural exchanges which are largely construed within study abroad discourses. This adds a timely contribution around the engagement with diversity and multiculturality within a national/local context.

Drawing from Kinginger (2010), Yap's paper reiterates the importance of stated objectives to foreground engagement with local communities within the curriculum in study away programs. She proposes that study away participants can consider their Kuleana, a Hawaiian concept that translates to "right, privilege", concern and responsibility" (Pukui and Elbert, 1986, 179) as a form of self-reflective ethos to assess their engagement with the study away program. This offers an opportunity for deep and critical learning which is reflected in the narratives from the participant's research. This example resonates with research in other contexts underpinning the stance that study away offers opportunity for self-reflexivity, inherent in students' agency (Fakunle and Pirre, 2021). Yap offers possible ways to consider how we

conceptualise and 'sell' study abroad through the lens of the host destination. This offers a decolonial lens of seeing the destination as place where the knowledge offering can foster a meaningful reciprocal exchange of knowledges. She proposes that the concept, huaka'I, offers such an opportunity to reimagine conceptions of what study away programs can offer. Hauka'I is described as a purposeful journey that demands that the sojourner remains open to what they might learn about themselves and the place.

Yap's research and other authors in this SI use the individual voices and their experience of mobility in higher education to remind the need for an analytical framework of micro-level narratives within internationalization studies. Highlighting these micro-level narratives reveals the gap in mainstream interpretations and definitions of internationalization. This points to the need for future work that develops inclusive frameworks connecting the micro and macro-level discourses and processes as a next level for growing scholarship in the field.

Transformational learning dimension in micro-level internationalization

Yap describes the transformative learning experiences of the students who took part in courses during their Study Away program. This was especially important for students who expressed interest in making a distinction between the learning focus of their study away program and what was described as the less wanted label of a 'tourist gaze'. Their perceptions were informed to an extent by their experience which differed from their pre-study assumptions about the place at a tourist destination. Drawing on Grünzweig & Rinehart (2002), Yap suggests a reframing of student mobility programs to situate disequilibrium that arises from engagement with difference as a key intended learning outcome. This illustrates the importance for such programs to include courses about the study away location and engagement with the community, and to embed reflective learning spaces to facilitate truly transformative learning that mobility from a familiar education can offer (in national and international contexts). Yap further suggests that these pedagogical engagements can be facilitated through a decolonial lens, echoing others in this SI.

Sicka and Atajanova's (2024) paper narrates the intercultural learning encounters afforded to two Early Career Researchers (ECRs) through virtual mobility during the Covid-19 pandemic. The two researchers were based in Turkey and in the USA. The latter is Indian, and the basis of their learning exchanges were framed by a sense of sisterhood forged by their Global South origins. Sicka and Atajanova emphasize the humanizing dimension of a Virtual Exchange (VE) program. Their autoethnography account expounds the potential and the benefit of VE as a viable platform to promote international learning and intercultural exchanges across borders without physical mobility. As self-described scholars from the Global South, their paper points to a sisterhood beyond national boundaries. They provide a rich account of their respectful dialogue that celebrates difference and values which they deem to reflect cross cultural understanding as necessary components of international education.

Sicka and Atajanova share connectivity amongst Global South participants in internationalization discourses. Their interactions reveal their similarities in their colonial and imperial histories, the cultural differences that enriched their learning process, and breaking stereotypes about the 'other'. Their VE echoes discursive notions of 'home' in Siczek's paper, and challenges faced in their different host communities in the USA and Turkey, such as an 8-hour time difference based on their respective locations. This imposed constraints on valued real-time interactions. Their observations have practical implications for VE design to be synchronous, asynchronous or a combination of both (Healy & Kennedy, 2020). While the emphasis in the paper is on students, and educators, it is important to also consider the impact on learning and teaching administrators who provide support for online platforms, and their accounts of the practical challenges, exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hamilton & Chalmers, 2021).

From their arguments about the value of embracing a sisterhood relationship during their VE experience, Sicka and Atajanova point to possibilities inherent in a humanizing framing of international learning encounters, refraining from dominant ideologies that centers around individualism and competition. They highlight the challenges with time which is less discussed in VE. Their reflections about complicities and silences remain an open question with no easy answers.

Nevertheless, micro-level narratives highlight differences and commonalities in ways of being that underpin the rich tapestries of culture that unfold within the affordances of internationalization, the endless learning possibilities about places that can be lived through the eyes of the other, and its enriching dimension for a rounded educational experience.

Generally, discussions about learning and pedagogy in internationalization focus on students. This is unsurprising as educational initiatives are designed for learners. However, everyone can be a learner in an internationalized classroom. This speaks to the focus in the paper by Weissova et al. (2024). The authors reiterate the need for explicit Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for academic staff who are 'key players' in international classrooms. Their empirical study involves 121 academic staff in a Swedish university. They adopt an andragogical approach to examine the CPD needs of academic staff. This approach situates the staff themselves as learners in the international classrooms, whilst acknowledging their professional roles. Their paper highlights the relatively lack of CPD courses that specifically support staff teaching in international classrooms.

A key takeaway from Weissova et al.'s paper is the need to focus on the needs of academic staff in developing CPD courses on teaching in international classrooms. As noted by Forrest & Peterson, (2006) addressing problematic issues provides learning opportunity in the classroom. This echoes Yap's point about the transformative learning potential that can be facilitated by the disequilibrium that occurs when students encounter difference in a foreign learning environment. In the context of an international classroom, Fakunle (2020) uses the example of a critical incident to buttress the point about the gap in training offerings to prepare academics to deal with incidences when teaching culturally diverse learners. The research by Weissova et al. provides an important contribution to this less researched area. The study identifies three main micro and macro-level challenges regarding teaching in international classrooms: language proficiency, inclusive learning for all students, and lack of institutional support. Although the study is based in Sweden the language issue centred around English, underscoring the prevalence of the English language as the lingua franca of international higher education. In addition to issues around equality of contributions to group work, the authors point to the challenge of creating an inclusive learning environment where diverse perspectives are welcome. This is especially challenging when students come from multiple local and international contexts. Their findings also point to the lack of institutional commitment, manifest in different ways such as "low organizational priority, resistance to curriculum internationalization, resource limitations, institutional pressure for homogenization, limited tools and time constraints". Their study, therefore, highlights the importance of institutional support to develop appropriate CPD opportunities for academics involved in teaching in internationalized classrooms.

Development dimension in micro-level internationalization

Professional and personal development are key themes also reported in the research by Weissova et al discussed above. As noted, the andragogical lens of looking at staff CPD courses is framed from the point of an adult learner. Their paper provides discussion about the developmental opportunities for teaching in an international classroom. Another study conducted in Sweden by Eltayb and Valcke using narrative interviews with participants from Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Brazil, Italy, and Poland explores developmental opportunities for educational developers (EDs), a rarely discussed group in internationalization research. ED roles as facilitators of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) courses appear to put them in the margins of internationalization discourses. To address this gap, Eltayb and Valcke's paper unveils the personal and professional development of educational developers while facilitating a transnational virtual exchange course on skills and competences for working in the glocal classroom.

Their findings suggest that the COIL classroom fostered a collegial environment for participants to compare their pedagogic experiences and to reflect on their own practices, such as their role to foster a sense of belonging for their students in their glocal classrooms, and to enhance awareness of global issues. The ED narratives about their experience of facilitating COIL courses provides valuable insights into the transformative possibilities inherent not only for students but also practitioners in engaged in internationalisation activities, linking to the micro-level dimension of transformative learning. Notably, the ambiguity around the notion of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) remains an area that requires

further interrogation, and this relates also to Fei's suggestion (discussed later) about the need for an expanded transnational lens in evaluating normative frameworks in internationalization.

Weiner and Ghazarian's (2024) phenomenological study explore how international students in the USA navigate the barriers around seeking employment. They do so from a humanizing perspective that considers the students' personal growth and development as they deal with the challenges they encounter. The authors use the international students' rationales conceptual framework (Fakunle, 2021) to explore and understand the educational, economic, experiential and aspirational dimensions of participants personal and professional journeys in the United States.

The intimate portrayal of the experiences of navigating the employment seeking process helps to capture the humanity behind the figures and the objectification of international students. This is a key goal in establishing micro-level internationalization as an important framework for understanding internationalization processes. Weiner and Ghazarian's research corroborates previous findings about the benefit of international higher education for personal growth, including expanded ways of thinking and developing their intercultural competence, especially while living in a different cultural context. They reiterate important points about the psychological pressure that results from the restrictions of the work opportunities and attendant economic pressures that had a negative impact on their well-being and overall student experience. Although the international students share common experiences with home students, they have the added pressure of being unaccustomed to the cultural norms in the host society. This is where the reports of little or no culturally relevant support from their institutions becomes problematic.

The issue around the shortcomings of careers support for international students is well discussed (Fakunle, 2021c; McFadden & Seedorff, 2017; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). Limitations of career services in relation to international student employability prospects in the UK (Fakunle 2021c) and Australia (Gribble, Rahimi and Blackmore, 2017) is reflected in the USA context reported in the findings. It is unclear why there seems to be little traction in institutions in addressing this gap that has been reported over decades. This challenge contradicts the idealised notion of international students as cash cows, as it does not fit with the struggles that international students face. The current crises in university funding highlights the danger of reliance on assumptions of perpetual elastic demand for international education without understanding micro-level rationales that can drive or constrain growth. Better understanding will ensure that both macro and micro level priorities are aligned to deliver benefits for actors involved in internationalisation processes.

The micro level narratives from both staff and students reveal gaps in institutional support for training and career advancement. This underpins the need for adopting an inclusive approach to internationalization that recognizes international staff and students' needs and how institutions can develop strategies to enable transformative experiences.

Context dimension in micro-level internationalization

Context matters. International education is hosted in a particular context. This enactment of micro-level internationalization examines how context impacts the constructions or experiences of internationalization from the perspectives and the experiences of individuals. This informs a broader understanding of internationalization as a lived experience and goes beyond dominant Western constructions.

Al Furquani and Lomer's (2024) paper focus on Oman, a non-Western context. The paper examines conceptualization of internationalization and the impact on the curriculum in Oman. The timeliness of their work is restated as the Middle East becomes a growing hub for internationalization activities. Al Furquani and Lomer challenge the uncritical adoption of Western frames for internationalization in non-Western contexts. This echoes Al-Atari's (2016) question about the conundrum that follows the interest in internationalization in the Arab context, without impinging on regionalization and nationalization. The same question could be applied to other non-Western contexts (for example, see Majee, 2020). The authors adopt a decolonial lens to examine the emergence of Western dominated higher education since 1986, and the yet unexamined tensions between the western-informed internationalist teaching and nationalist promulgation of the Omani identity. For instance, the limited applicability of international curriculum materials for the local communities was considered as problematic by the study participants who are Omani academics. In a similar vein, the lack of input from local cultures in the curriculum was faulted. As has been well reported, the participants critique the use of English as a medium

of instruction and "over-reliance on Western models and textbooks which students often find hard to relate to", underpinnings perceptions of neo-colonialism in Omani HE. Recommendations include adopting inclusive and decolonial practices in curriculum, accreditation and policy making for all staff and students.

In sum, Al Furquani and Lomer provide an overview of the development of internationalization in higher education in the Oman context. They reiterate the need for a decolonial approach in the growing field in line with national policy and priorities, and in recognition of cultural tensions that accompany an uncritical adoption of Western norms in non-Western educational contexts. Their paper unearths staff insights regarding internationalization and structural gaps, and the paper shows how these micro-level narratives are disconnected from institutional policy.

The challenges with understanding "micro-level internationalization in context" is not confined to what happens outside Western contexts. Dugay's paper highlights the opportunities and challenges faced by international academics in the UK context. The author adopts a social constructivism methodology and intersectionality to explore the interconnectedness of the professional and the social amongst Turkish academics at different career levels in UK universities. They discuss how ethnicity, gender, and religion intersect to impact the professional lives of academics. The notion of a 'Whiteness threshold' is put forward as a dividing line that determines whether the academics have a positive or negative experience, based on their personal and social characteristics. Interestingly, the 50 research participants are Turkish, hence they have the same nationality. This group affiliation usually informs normative policy categorizations of international staff (and students). But the research invites a critical interrogation of the personal and social distinctions that impact the experiences of international academics, regardless of their group nationality affiliation. As noted by the author, this calls for policy considerations that recognize and reflect the nuances in the diversity that international academics bring into the different context of working abroad. The micro-level narratives in western and non-western contexts point to the need to re-examine existing narrow lens of conceptualizing what internationalization entails. The final section explores this further.

Conceptual framing dimension in micro-level internationalization

Also alluding to the importance of context, Fei's paper reminds us of an important distinction between previous work on race and racism that focuses on individuals born in the USA versus international students whose conception (or lack of) is borne from outside the US-race logic but are nonetheless subsumed into racialized discourses by virtue of their choice of study destination. Fei examines the well-cited Fries-Britt et al. (2014) Learning Race in a U.S. Context (LRUSC) emergent framework to ascertain the extent to which subsequent work further contributes to understanding of the racial learning experiences of international students. The systematic review of 11 studies involving 207 international students from Africa and the Carribean (similar to cohort for the LRUSC study), Europe, South Asia, East Asia, South America, Central America (Canada & Mexico), and the Middle East (Oman) reveals micro level narratives about the development of awareness of race and racial discourses in the US context. The papers reviewed reiterate the precarity of international student status as a major reason for not engaging in racial encounters in the public sphere (Yao 2022b). Fei further suggests that a revised LRUSC framework should include a transnational lens that considers students' home context, the impact of Whiteness ideology on racial thinking, and how the outcomes of racial learning may be mediated by students' plans for their future.

In Fei's paper the expanded perspectives from the wider range of international students add important nuances to the LRUSC framework. For example, the review reveals a complex picture of how racialized tropes from home countries can filter into host destination campuses, in this case, in the USA (Jiang, 2021; Ritter, 2016), and this should be considered in efforts to address racism in international education. Furthermore, the review supports the ideal of 'Integrative Awareness' denoting that students achieve an understanding of their racial-ethnic identities within the U.S context, and avowal to ending racial injustice is deemed possible. However, other outcomes were identified, as students resisted seeing their sense of being through US-centric interpretations of race. Hence, Fei's paper demonstrates the importance of utilizing research into micro-level narratives to underpin the development of conceptual frameworks, in this case using a meta-level systematic literature review. Other micro-level informed conceptual models are also evident in other papers in this Special Issue (Eltayb and

Valcke; Isiaka and Olaniyan; Nyamunda et al). Additionally, Weiner & Ghazarian utilize an existing students' rationales framework (Fakunle, 2021) as a theoretical underpinning for their research (Kivunja, 2018). Possibilities to advance conceptual frameworks in micro-level internationalization look promising.

Fakunle proposes the concept of centrality through a decolonial lens. The paper highlights how the experiences and erasures of international academic staff in internationalization begs the dismantling of normative discourses as to the centrality of Western-centric hegemonic epistemology. By contrast, the paper directly addresses how epistemicide entailing the exclusion of knowledge of racially marginalized persons from the Global South (Santos, 2014) and historicide, that ensures the erasure of their cultural history (Dube and Moyo, 2022) are linked to manifestations of perpetual subalternity that impacts their personal and professional experiences as international academic staff (and students). The proposed conceptualization of centrality offers a framework that affirms the legitimacy of the knowledges, lived experiences and agentic capabilities of racially minoritized people. This addresses the epistemic injustice underpinned by hegemonic epistemological posturing of Eurocentrism and Western-centric knowledge that undermines and undervalues other knowledges.

Crucially, Fakunle points to the several allusions about centrality in extant literature, in different disciplines and epistemological paradigms. On the one hand, the discourses arise from a well-established positivist paradigm in theoretical postulation in various disciplines in the social sciences. On the other hand, there are extensive allusions to centering/ de-centering and re-centering in extant work in decolonialization (Dube and Moyo, 2022; Santos, 2014). The paper proposes centrality as a conceptual framework as a "metacognitive, reflective and operational element" informed by underlying thinking and consideration (Kivunja, 2018, 47) across different disciplinary and epistemological paradigms.

Through a decolonial lens, centrality offers a framework that can reframe approaches to addressing the racial marginalization of non-Western knowledges and the people that embody them, who remain in the shadows in decolonization work. The paper reaffirms call for White allyship (Santos, 2014) to jointly dismantle the shackles of coloniality which refers to 'the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations, produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system' (Grosfoguel 2007, 219). The paper broaches the topic of positionality, which recent debates (Savolainen, et al, 2023) point to its insufficiency to address what research, such as Arday, Belluigi, & Thomas's (2021) find as the persisting issue of coloniality, and the consequent racism, micro-aggression and erasure of knowledges of racially marginalized staff that beset the academy. Centrality is well aligned to the decolonial lens adopted in papers in this SI, and it offers a potential framework for examining issues of racialized marginalization revealed by the micro-level narratives in Western and non-Western contexts in this SI, and beyond.

Conclusion

The papers in this Special Issue shed light on the micro-level narratives of internationalization and highlight different dimensions that are rarely, if ever, captured. While the stories they tell offer the opportunity to enrich our understanding, this Special Issue wishes to serve as a call to action. The papers have been grouped under the 5 dimensions of Mobility, Transformational Learning, Development, Context and Conceptual Framing, and each of these dimensions offers its specific insights that point to new ways forward in our understandings and enactments of internationalization. The micro narratives reveal gaps in mainstream thinking and point to future action needed for the development of frameworks connecting the micro and macro levels that will enable institutions to address the disconnect between policy and individual experience and develop more inclusive strategies and practices.

A micro-level framework can help to bring to the fore how different individuals experience internationalization, and how their narratives relate to dominant presentations of internationalization. They can highlight real life ramifications of issues that are currently under the radar and risk being subsumed under dominant priorities, raising the need to rethink internationalization beyond economic rationality (Fakunle, 2021). As many authors in this SI have put forward, a transnational lens underpinned by decoloniality can help to understand the individual experience more deeply and use that knowledge to humanize the experience of internationalization

Micro-level internationalization: Mobility

While it is unsurprising that mobility runs as a thematic thread throughout the papers, important nuances are noted. Students navigate the trenches of unfamiliar international education landscapes, encountering multiple issues in the decision-making and application processes, integration into the new academic environment during their time abroad, and in the re-entry phase and beyond. The narratives also add the dimension of study away as an alternative construction of meaningful exchange of knowledges without crossing borders. Whether in national or international contexts, in the search for better ways of supporting the student mobility experience, the call to action is to use a humanizing lens to promote student agency and transformative growth that mobility affords.

Micro-level internationalization: Transformational Learning

This dimension highlights the need for learning spaces that facilitate truly transformative learning, not only for students, but also for academics and administrators, not only in physical but also in virtual spaces. Such spaces have the potential to offer endless enriching learning possibilities if designed with a view to promoting respectful dialogue and cultural understanding through a co-construction of knowledge and expansion of worldviews. The challenges to creating such spaces are manifold and solutions can be found only when institutions are willing to make it happen and commit the necessary human, financial and time resources.

Micro-level internationalization: Development

Institutional support is key in providing opportunities for development – personal or professional – to students, academics and administrators, and requires a willingness to examine and re-imagine a more inclusive approach to policies and practice. The micro-narratives highlight how lack of institutional support puts international students and staff at a disadvantage as they navigate complex and unfamiliar administrative processes. Conversely, the micro-narratives demonstrate how creating a humanized environment promoting a sense of belonging and reflection practice can lead to genuine development for participants.

Micro-level internationalization: Context

The micro-narratives narratives of context highlight how institutional policies are often disconnected from the individual experiences of internationalization, highlighting the narrowness of the lenses used to define the international dimension. This highlights the need for policies that are meaningful in the local context rather than uncritical borrowing of policies and norms from other education contexts that can lead to cultural tensions, or the adoption of policies that group individuals according to national affiliation rather than consider their diversity of needs and experiences. This implies thinking more carefully about how policy implementation is experienced by individuals.

Micro-level internationalization: Conceptual framing

The papers in this Special Issue have made an initial contribution to the promising development of a micro-level conceptual framing that can reframe understandings and reshape practices for the humanization of internationalization. It goes without saying that internationalisation processes are impossible without the contribution of individual actors whether students, academics or administrators. It therefore remains curious as to the persisting limited focus on individual narratives in internationalization studies, and the lack of conceptual frameworks to guide the way forward. This Special Issue aspires to start a new conversation that can lead to improvement in the lives of all who experience internationalization in its multiple forms and dimensions.

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