Volume 2, Issue 1 (2026), Article ev2i1.12.
Journal of Global Higher Education
https://journal.libraries.wm.edu/global_higher_education/index

RESEARCH ARTICLE

(Un)Making Knowledge: Towards Cognitive Justice in International Higher Education

Vera Spangler*
University of Surrey, UK
v.spangler@surrey.ac.uk
ORCiD: 0000-0002-5761-8421
*Corresponding author

Abstract

This article examines how internationalisation in higher education shapes knowledge-making processes, drawing on ethnographic data from universities in the UK, Denmark, and Germany. It addresses macro-level issues of knowledge, power, and global hierarchies through an analysis of the micro-level experiences of international students and lecturers. The study investigates knowledge creation and sharing within internationalised classrooms across these three field sites and six masters' cohorts. Through comparative analysis, it elucidates the varying degrees to which the educational environments at each institution facilitate or inhibit student collaboration, openness to diverse epistemologies, and critical reflexivity regarding power asymmetries and knowledge hierarchies. The paper highlights the need for academic institutions to move beyond expecting international students to adapt to existing frameworks and instead engage with their potential to transform and challenge established practices. This research offers new insights into how internationalisation can be reimagined to promote more inclusive educational practices.

Keywords: knowledge construction, international student mobility, knowledge legitimacy, international classroom, pedagogies

Introduction: Epistemic Dominance in Higher Education

Higher education (HE) internationalisation has been deemed instrumental in creating and exchanging knowledge and educating globally engaged students for an ever more fast-moving, complex, and interconnected world. It encompasses multiple strategies and practices, including international student mobility (ISM), curriculum internationalisation, research partnerships, and pedagogical approaches that engage diverse perspectives. Larsen (2016) provides a useful lens for understanding internationalisation as the expansion of the university's spatial reach through the mobility of students, scholars, knowledge, and programmes. This perspective emphasises its relational and transformative nature; as people

and knowledge move across borders, they reshape institutional practices, governance, and knowledge hierarchies. ISM, in particular, exemplifies these dynamics, highlighting how knowledge is carried, contested, and mobilised across institutional and national boundaries (Madge et al., 2015; Raghuram, 2013). However, these flows are far from neutral, being shaped by historical inequalities, institutional norms, and the uneven geographies of academic authority.

Internationalisation is often portrayed as inherently positive and progressive, a neutral response to globalisation, and a driver of institutional prestige and educational quality (Madge et al., 2009; Morley et al., 2018). Yet, critical perspectives have increasingly highlighted its potential to reproduce global hierarchies, particularly institutions of the global north and western/ised HE institutions (e.g., Garwe & Thondhlana, 2021; Mwangi et al., 2018; Stein et al., 2016). Dominant approaches can reinforce eurocentric and colonialist foundations, privileging certain widely recognised epistemologies while marginalising historically and politically situated knowledges from other regions (Liu, 2020; Perez Mejias et al., 2018; Stein, 2017). Although recent efforts have sought to decolonise curricula and incorporate global epistemologies, these remain uneven and often limited in scope.

This study investigates these dynamics through an ethnographic, cross-national study of universities in the UK, Denmark, and Germany. It examines how macro-level global knowledge hierarchies intersect with micro-level classroom practices, analysing the agents, institutional norms, and processes that mediate the dominance of eurocentric epistemologies and shape the possibilities for epistemic dialogue and knowledge co-creation. By exploring how institutional structures, pedagogical practices, and international students' agency interact, the study highlights the mechanisms that enable or constrain more equitable forms of knowledge production. In doing so, it advocates for pedagogical approaches that recognise and value the diverse epistemologies international students bring to academic communities.

Reimagining Pedagogy and Knowledge Creation with International Students

Currently, approximately 6.9 million students study outside their country of origin (UNESCO, 2025), significantly altering classroom dynamics and increasing cultural diversity in educational institutions worldwide. International students bring extensive experiences and skills, seeking opportunities to learn, grow, and be valued. However, the extent to which these positive experiences materialise often depends on how international students are positioned within, and negotiate, interactions with peers and lecturers in their new academic environments. While some lecturers adopt ethical and inclusive teaching methods, research consistently shows that pedagogical practices with international students are often assimilative rather than interculturally transformative and inclusive (e.g. Ploner, 2018). Turner (2013) points to participatory dynamics in the anglo-western HE classroom, where student-centred learning approaches such as presentations, group work, discussions, and debates are common. Talking is viewed as a sign of engagement, active participation, and critical thinking, whereas silent students are often perceived as disengaged and passive (Karram, 2013; Straker, 2016). International students' silence is frequently misinterpreted as a lack of participation or critical thinking (Song & McCarthy, 2018), leading to their marginalisation, especially for those who prefer quiet reflection (Ryan & Viete, 2009). International students

are often represented as ‘other’ or ‘different’ (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004) and positioned as distinct from home students (Anderson, 2014), who may even avoid them (Harrison & Peacock, 2009).

Education is commonly seen as the creation and sharing of knowledge, though others emphasise its economic role in enhancing human capital and supporting labour market outcomes (Leoni, 2025). However, it is equally important to acknowledge that education is intertwined with the ongoing histories of violence and the continued legitimisation of structural and historical injustice (Sriprakash, 2023). Universities are one of the key agents in the dissemination and legitimisation of knowledge. However, due to universities’ historical focus on eurocentric traditions, international students from other contexts have often been treated as passive receivers of ‘western wisdom’ (Tange & Kastberg, 2013). This issue is particularly pronounced in countries of the global north, where educational practices frequently prioritise dominant knowledge systems, marginalising the diverse perspectives and contributions of international students from regions such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Simultaneously, the agents of reproduction are not only individual lecturers but also broader curricular norms, institutional incentives, and global rankings that legitimise these hegemonic epistemologies. However, even in universities in the global south, local curricula and assessment practices can reproduce similar hierarchies, privileging hegemonic norms and expectations, including for inbound international students, which highlights the persistent global dominance of eurocentric knowledge systems and invites critical reflection on their reproduction and legitimacy (Kassis et al., 2022; Lambert et al., 2021; Ndaipa et al., 2023). Many western HE institutions view international students' ways of knowing as inferior (Stein & de Andreotti, 2015), with international students reporting that their indigenous knowledges go unrecognised (Dei, 2000; Zhou et al., 2005). Moosavi (2022) and Song and McCarthy (2018) note that a common stereotype in academic literature portrays non-western students and/or ethnic minority students, particularly Asians, as lacking critical thinking. This is often attributed to their culture, which is perceived to inhibit independent thought or questioning. Moosavi argues this reflects a dominant epistemic bias that assumes western students naturally possess critical thinking, while students from other backgrounds are cast as ‘deviant learners’.

Madge et al. (2009; 2015) illustrate the relative neglect of critical reflections about academic responsibility and care for international students within the context of western HE. They show that international students are rarely considered partners in pedagogy or recognised as knowledge agents in these institutions. As Wu (2015) and Heng (2018) argue, this perspective necessitates recognising international students’ diverse prior experiences and knowledge, and understanding difference not as a deficiency. One central aspect is lecturers’ awareness of the different knowledge systems in multicultural settings and their willingness to work across them. Yet many internationalised classrooms suffer from the problem of ‘ethnocentric pedagogy’ (Tange, 2008) in which lecturers tend to view their own educational methods and pedagogical philosophy as superior or may show a lack of awareness of others. These processes, spanning lecturer habitus, institutional curricula, and broader epistemic traditions, help explain how eurocentric dominance is sustained not only through intention but also through routine pedagogical practice. This often prompts lecturers, consciously or unconsciously, to dismiss alternative educational practices and to perceive international students as ‘empty vessels’ (Singh, 2005) who must be filled with euro-american knowledge. For universities to establish a new stance (i.e., questioning the ‘universalism’ of

hegemonic teaching and learning practices), Ryan (2011) calls for transnational approaches that encompass respect and mutual dialogue *amongst* knowledge traditions and academic cultures rather than promoting practices of interactions *between* cultures with one culture in a position of power. This aligns with my study, which explores how international students navigate these power dynamics in HE classrooms across the UK, Denmark, and Germany. By examining how knowledge is shared and produced, my research seeks to uncover whether the ideal of mutual respect and dialogue is reflected in classroom interactions or if existing practices still perpetuate unequal power relations.

(Global) Cognitive Justice

The everyday social practices within an 'international classroom' are shaped by the students' diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, as well as the structural, cultural, and national characteristics of the host institution and its lecturers. As such, the 'international classroom' becomes a dynamic meeting point for sharing knowledge and negotiating legitimacy (Spangler & Adriansen, 2021). The diverse trajectories of international students involved in educational mobility create a web of extended, multiple connections and complex relations, often spanning long distances. In classrooms where international students and lecturers meet, these different trajectories, backgrounds, and knowledges converge, creating spaces for negotiation and exchange. This convergence illustrates the mobile spatial conditions of knowledge production within and through internationalisation, while also revealing the significant role of students (as mobile bodies) in processes of knowledge circulation. Knowledge is generated through encounters; it is constantly evolving, shaped by various places and times (Raghuram, 2013). This is crucial to consider as it opens up the possibility of reflecting on the transformative potential of HE internationalisation. However, given the ongoing global dominance and eurocentric orientation of many universities, we must critically question what kinds of transformations are possible within the context of internationalisation and anglophone HE institutions (Stein, 2017). Furthermore, we need to examine the extent to which pedagogic spaces can act as 'powerful focal points' (Madge et al., 2015, p. 688) for knowledge production and circulation, particularly in terms of legitimising alternative epistemes within classrooms and institutions.

Decolonial scholars (e.g. Mbembe, 2016; Mignolo, 2003; Quijano, 2000) have long argued that universities were not peripheral but constitutive of colonial projects, playing a key role in classifying and ordering the world through knowledge production. Central herein is the work of de Sousa Santos (2014) which highlights the university as a colonial institution that shapes our understanding of knowledge. de Sousa Santos (2014) describes modern western thinking as 'abyssal thinking' (p. 118), which divides social reality into two realms, rendering one side invisible and excluded from legitimate discourse. To achieve cognitive justice, he advocates for a 'post-abyssal thinking' (p. 124) that recognises the incompleteness of all knowledges and promotes an 'ecology of knowledges' (p. 176), where diverse knowledge systems are valued through intercultural dialogue. Similarly, Connell (2006) identifies tacit mechanisms that sustain northern epistemic authority, including claims to universality, interpreting knowledge from the centre, selective referencing of literature, and the broader erasure of colonial experiences. Translating these critiques into the classroom, pedagogical strategies can actively challenge such hierarchies by, for instance, integrating

diverse texts and perspectives into the curriculum, encouraging discussions that interrogate dominant epistemologies, and designing collaborative projects that allow students to engage with multiple ways of knowing. By creating opportunities for these dialogues, students can critically engage with different theories and apply their unique understandings to real-world social issues, thus empowering them to act based on their diverse experiences (see also Freire, 2000). This approach to pedagogy, rooted in cognitive justice, moves beyond eurocentric models, encouraging a learning environment where multiple knowledge systems can coexist and interact. However, it is not about rejecting western ideas entirely; rather, it is about fostering intercultural exchanges that value different epistemologies.

This paper explores how knowledge negotiation and the legitimacy of diverse epistemologies unfold across HE contexts in the three fieldsites. The convergence of diverse backgrounds and knowledges in international classrooms provides a critical space for such negotiations. However, given the dominance of hegemonic epistemologies, my study examines how pedagogic spaces can either reinforce or challenge these existing power structures and explores the potential for recognising and valuing diverse knowledges within these spaces. At the same time, I acknowledge the assumptions shaping how cognitive justice might be enacted – what it means for it to be possible, desired, sought, materialised, or resisted within internationalised pedagogical spaces – and how knowledge production, sharing, and transmission are implicated in these dynamics. Moreover, it is important to note that while this study refers to categories such as 'western' and 'non-western' knowledge, these are not treated as fixed or homogenous. Ushiyama (2025) cautions that such binaries can obscure the hybrid, relational, and transnational character of knowledge production, particularly the ways in which so-called 'non-western' scholars have reshaped, rather than merely resisted, dominant epistemologies (see also Sud & Sánchez-Ancochea, 2022). In this sense, these terms are used here as historically contingent and politically charged signifiers, analytically useful for tracing global asymmetries, but always requiring careful, situated use to avoid reproducing essentialisms. In line with this, certain terms (such as western and eurocentric) are decapitalised as a deliberate gesture to decentre epistemic dominance.

Research Project

This paper draws on empirical material from a cross-national ethnography conducted over 11 months (September 2023–July 2024) across the UK, Denmark, and Germany. The selection of these three countries was guided by their contrasting national and institutional landscapes, which differently shape the internationalisation of HE. Although all three occupy relatively privileged positions within the global HE field, they diverge significantly in tuition models (ranging from high fees in the UK to tuition-free provision in Germany), language policies, and recent political shifts. The UK's post-Brexit repositioning (Brooks & Waters, 2023), Denmark's move from a period of 'de-internationalisation' to renewed international engagement (Tange & Jæger, 2021), and Germany's continued expansion of internationalisation alongside integration initiatives (DAAD, 2020) each offer distinct policy and pedagogical conditions. These variations are significant for the project's broader concern with how knowledge legitimacy is negotiated across ISM regimes, and how these processes participate in the (re)production of global hierarchies. I followed two cohorts of master's students (approximately 160 students in total) in each country for the duration of a semester

or teaching block. The six programmes were selected from an initial pool of 51 contacted programmes (3 UK, 4 Denmark, 2 Germany), based on accessibility and the feasibility of parallel classroom observations. The choice of universities was based solely on logistical considerations of the study.

In the UK, students were enrolled in one-year master's programmes, whereas in Denmark and Germany, programmes lasted two years. The composition of the international student groups varied due to country-specific policies and geopolitical factors such as Brexit, and this variation was also reflected in the composition of the key informant group. In the UK, the majority of international students came from outside Europe, while in Denmark, most were European. In Germany, the cohorts reflected a more globally mixed student body. These differences in cohort composition shaped the selection of key informants, as I aimed to capture a broad range of perspectives within each setting. Students either approached me to participate in interviews, or I actively recruited them by approaching individuals directly in class.

The group of lecturers I observed in the UK comprised 4 lecturers, 1 professor, 1 associate professor, 1 teaching fellow, and 1 PhD student, with 6 of them having an international background (i.e., born in a different country and having obtained their HE degree abroad). In Denmark, the group consisted of 5 associate professors and 1 assistant professor, with all but one being of Danish origin. In Germany, there were 2 PhD students, 2 postdoctoral researchers, and 3 professors, two of whom had an international background. To maintain confidentiality, all names have been anonymised. This study was approved by the University of Surrey Ethics Committee (reference number FASS 22-23 086 EGA).

The research design adopted a participatory approach, focusing on conducting research *with* international students rather than on or about them (see Spangler, 2024, for a detailed discussion of the methodological approach). A number of qualitative methods were employed, including participant observation both inside and outside the classroom, timeline interviews, walking interviews, and a creative workshop. For this study, I draw on fieldnotes from participant observations and empirical materials from the two rounds of student interviews. Additionally, I incorporate materials from interviews conducted with lecturers, which focused on their academic pathways, pedagogical beliefs, and teaching approaches. Interviews were conducted in either English or German, depending on participant's preference.

The analysis was inductive and iterative, developed through sustained engagement with interview transcripts, walking conversations, and observational notes. I began by reading each student's materials holistically, noting recurring tensions, affective registers, and spatial references. Through this process, I assembled narrative profiles that traced individual educational trajectories while foregrounding the relational, institutional, and geopolitical contexts in which these unfolded. Rather than fragmenting the data into discrete themes, I worked across and within accounts to attend to movement, disjuncture, and meaning-making over time. This approach enabled a reading of students' experiences as situated and storied, reflecting a commitment to a spatially and ethically attuned analysis.

Given the participatory nature of this research, engaging critically with my positionality was essential, as it shaped not only access to insights but also the co-construction of knowledge throughout the study (Spangler, 2023). For example, being an international student myself, and my familiarity with the educational systems and languages of the respective countries, enabled me to connect with participants. However, I also

acknowledge that, as a white woman, I cannot claim a full understanding of the racialised or discriminatory experiences that some students face. I do not, therefore, frame my role in binary terms of insider or outsider status, but instead focused on creating a space where our respective positionalities complemented each other throughout the research process. However, I recognise that, particularly during data analysis and the writing-up phase, my position carries inherent power. For example, selecting certain excerpts and piecing together narratives, thereby making decisions about which stories to portray, posed a challenge in which I wrestled with my positionality, particularly after the more participatory, co-constructed nature of the data during fieldwork.

Table 1: Overview of the Programmes

Country	Cohort	Total	International students	Subject area
UK	M1	24	12	Theatre and performing arts
UK	M2	24	12	Economics
Denmark	M3	22	6	Outdoor education and environmental studies
Denmark	M4	47	23	Food systems and society
Germany	M5	20	19	Neuroscience and modelling
Germany	M6	23	18	Environmental systems and planning

Rethinking Knowledge Production in International Higher Education

The first section of the analysis explores how students' decisions regarding mobility are shaped by spatial hierarchies and the symbolic value attributed to particular study destinations, especially those framed as sites of academic legitimacy. It examines how these expectations intersect with the dominance of hegemonic epistemologies in curricula and classroom discussions, and how students experience and, at times, begin to question these hierarchies through their studies. The second section focuses on pedagogical approaches across the three national contexts, exploring how institutional practices and teaching methods shape students' opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives. It highlights the extent to which students can participate in knowledge production and reflects on how international students' experiences and ways of knowing might challenge and reimagine dominant academic norms.

Curriculum and the engagement of international students

Student mobility is influenced not only by practical considerations but also by the symbolic and academic value attributed to specific destinations, creating spatial hierarchies among countries and institutions (Waters & Brooks, 2021). The geographical location of universities, therefore, plays a crucial role in shaping international students' perceptions and study choices (Kölbel, 2020). This spatial hierarchy extends beyond physical mobility to epistemic structures, reinforcing the dominance of eurocentric knowledge systems and positioning countries like the UK and the USA as global centres of legitimacy and authority (Brooks, 2018; Jöns, 2015). Students' decisions about where to study are thus not merely pragmatic but are shaped by the continued framing of western knowledge as universal. These dynamics were also evident in many of my participants' decisions regarding where to study; students opting for the UK frequently cited its strong reputation for HE compared to other locations worldwide, whereas students in Denmark and Germany often based their choices on existing personal ties to the country through family members or partners, or, in the case of EU students, the ease of free movement. Several participants emphasised that their expectations of studying abroad were centred on acquiring western theories, which they viewed as solutions or as essential knowledge to be applied in their home countries upon returning. This reflects the continued perception of eurocentric epistemologies as inherently superior and universally applicable, a key feature of what de Sousa Santos (2014) describes as 'abyssal thinking', which renders other ways of knowing invisible. For example, Kylie (M1, Singapore) and Lily (M2, Malawi), both students in the UK, expressed a strong desire to learn from the local context, with the intention of returning home to effect change and improve their home systems in one way or another. Similarly, Yuyina (M6, Mexico) was motivated to study abroad to learn from a different context and bring about change at home. However, her experiences in Germany and the readings assigned in her classes, prompted a shift in her perspective:

> I'm definitely critical about the western idea of 'you should be developed this way' (…) we have this confrontative or these two paradigms against each other, which is like indigenous as traditional and modern as western, which we should go modern. So

> that's why now again, I really value some things that Mexico has, or in general, Latin America has, because I think before this construction of the system and the capitalism, we had a different approach about living within the nature (…) So, I'm really critical, and sadly now I'm here. I wanted to be part of this.

Yuyina's reflection highlights a key tension within HE internationalisation. While the promise of mobility is often framed as access to superior knowledge, she actively negotiated, reinterpreted, and applied knowledge to her own context, challenging the epistemic exclusions embedded within these systems. Her critique echoes de Sousa Santos' (2014) argument that western epistemologies do not simply co-exist with others but often marginalise them, positioning them as less relevant or suitable for addressing diverse contexts. By recognising the limitations of 'the western model', Yuyina asserts her epistemic agency and questions the notion that international education constitutes a straightforward transfer of knowledge from dominant academic contexts to others (see Rogers, 2018). This kind of critical reflexivity was particularly evident among students studying M6 in Germany, where the course design encouraged active participation in shaping knowledge production. Case studies were often student-selected, and seminar structures allowed students to contribute to lesson planning. Each week, students delivered presentations on self-selected topics, integrating examples from their home countries and additional literature beyond the prescribed syllabus. A crucial element of learning thus lies in creating opportunities for international students to engage creatively and reflectively with curricular content – opportunities that can reinforce or begin to unsettle existing epistemic hierarchies. Although, as Jeffrey (M6, Canada) notes, the primary theories reflected established hegemonic frameworks, students were given opportunities to broaden their scope and incorporate different sources:

> I think other things are definitely included. The underlying tone is still western (…) the base case studies for our own readings would usually be like Germany, UK, USA (…) But I think due to having such an international class, we automatically lean towards our own countries or to other countries. A lot of my [self-chosen readings] are either from China, from Canada, from the US, from the UK … while we have a classmate from Nepal, so, you'd be leaning towards Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh (…) So, I think having this diverse mix means that we not only bring our bias with us, but we also take a lot more than that.

Jeffrey's use of the word 'bias' here is particularly interesting. In this context, bias does not merely denote personal subjectivity but rather the structuring influence of dominant epistemologies. His reflection illustrates that cognitive justice is not simply about integrating diverse perspectives but about challenging the assumption that hegemonic theories constitute a neutral, objective base upon which other perspectives are appended (de Sousa Santos, 2014). Through encounters with a range of epistemic standpoints, students not only expand their views but also exercise their agency in reinterpreting, contesting, and reconfiguring knowledge frameworks. In this way, bias represents both a starting point and an opportunity for broader learning and understanding.

By contrast, in Denmark, students worked in groups on projects, typically culminating in a final presentation. While weekly seminars and lectures provided structured learning, student involvement was limited to updates on project progress rather than sustained engagement with knowledge production. Although lecturers aimed to incorporate 'international perspectives' into their syllabus, class discussions and content primarily centred on Danish and other western cases. This focus on national examples inadvertently reinforced a form of epistemic insularity, in which knowledge was filtered through a dominant regional frame, limiting opportunities for alternative epistemologies to be meaningfully integrated into academic discourse (see Rogers, 2018). A similar pattern emerged in the UK, where students noted that curriculum content and theories predominantly focused on western contexts. This created a disconnect, as many found the examples and theoretical applications difficult to relate to their own experiences. Harry (M2, Vietnam), for instance, found it challenging to contextualise UK- and US-based examples, often needing to revisit lecture recordings to determine their relevance. This reflects a broader issue within HE internationalisation, while marketed as 'global', curricula frequently assume the western context as the default, requiring international students to engage in one-way adaptation rather than fostering reciprocal epistemic dialogue (R'boul, 2022). Lily (M2, Malawi) also reflected on her classroom experience and noted the colonial connections between the UK and Malawi. Having worked in Malawi's finance sector before starting her master's, she recognised a mismatch between the theories and structural approaches taught in class and their ineffectiveness when applied to her home country:

> The Malawian context is very different … but it's not so different because we're still colonised by the British (…) Our country is in shales [precarious economic state] (…) When you read the theory here [UK], it'll work because you have all these other structures (…) Just taking it into our context, you stress the whole system out because our fundamentals and structures are not really as strong. So, I think for me that's where the mismatch is.

Lily's critique exposes the limitations of transferring dominant economic models to other contexts, reinforcing de Sousa Santos' (2014) argument that such knowledge often assumes universality while ignoring local (epistemic) conditions. This aligns with Raghuram's (2013) view that knowledge is shaped by spatial and historical contingencies rather than existing in an abstract, universal form. Beyond absorbing information, international students actively make sense of knowledge through their own epistemic lenses, shaped by their backgrounds, prior education, and socio-political contexts. Such acts of translation and critique demonstrate that students themselves are key agents in mediating encounters between dominant theories and lived realities, though institutional structures rarely acknowledge or support this role (see also Hayes et al., 2024; van Oorschot, 2014). This process recalls Freire's (2000) notion of critical consciousness, wherein learners begin to recognise and interrogate the underlying power dynamics that structure their educational experiences (see also Skelton, 2024). In international classrooms, such moments of awareness may emerge through encounters with dominant epistemologies, which are presented as neutral or universal but frequently conflict with students' own knowledge frameworks.

The divergence in student engagement across the three contexts reveals how different institutional and pedagogic approaches, to varying extents, reinforce or challenge

epistemic hierarchies. In the German context, where students were given greater influence over classroom dialogue, they displayed a heightened reflexivity towards how knowledge is produced and legitimised. The seminar structure, which enabled students to select case studies and readings, opened spaces where diverse epistemologies could enter and reconfigure academic discussion. This participatory model resonates with Freire's (2000) emphasis on dialogic learning, in which knowledge is co-constructed rather than transmitted. Here, students move beyond passive consumption towards a more critical and generative engagement with academic material, while also reflecting on the dominant patterns of knowledge production within their academic environments (see Rogers, 2018). In contrast, students in the UK and Denmark encountered more rigid curriculum structures, where eurocentric models remained largely unchallenged. While both contexts expressed a rhetorical commitment to internationalisation, students were offered limited avenues to shape academic content or bring in perspectives rooted in their own contexts. This contrast demonstrates how institutional processes – curriculum design, lecturer authority, and assessment practices – mediate the extent to which international students can act as epistemic contributors rather than passive recipients (van Oorschot, 2014). In some cases, international students may thus have struggled to develop the reflexive awareness necessary to interrogate these hierarchies or to assert the value of their own knowledge traditions within the classroom. Without structured encouragement, the process of claiming epistemic space remained largely individual, and for many, inaccessible. Yet even if foreign universities were to provide such encouragement, questions remain regarding its sufficiency and desirability. The broader responsibility for enabling students to act as reflexive agents also lies with home institutions, governments, and scholarship bodies, whose support is critical if students are to mobilise their knowledges across national, linguistic, and epistemic boundaries (see also Lin & Liu, 2019; Madge et al., 2009).

This comparison illustrates the uneven possibilities for cognitive justice within international HE. While students bring diverse epistemologies into the classroom, the extent to which these knowledges are legitimised or rendered peripheral depends on institutional structures and pedagogical choices. This suggests that although international classrooms hold the potential for epistemic diversity, realising that potential requires more than the inclusion of multiple voices. It requires a fundamental rethinking of curricular authority and knowledge production, not only within receiving institutions but also across the wider educational ecosystems that shape students' capacities to claim epistemic space (see also Carbone, 2025). Such a shift is central to critical pedagogies (e.g. Giroux, 2020; hooks, 1994; Skelton, 2024), which call for educational spaces that are not only dialogic but also attentive to the power relations embedded in what is taught, how it is taught, and whose knowledge is recognised as valid. Cognitive justice, in this sense, entails more than diversifying curriculum content; it requires a reorientation of how knowledge is produced, shared, and valued within educational spaces (see Stein, 2017). This involves cultivating epistemic plurality as a foundational principle, recognising that international students bring embodied knowledges rooted in specific histories, geographies, and struggles. Pedagogical approaches grounded in dialogue, co-creation, and attentiveness to relational dynamics offer openings for such plurality to be meaningfully enacted (see also Gravett, 2023). In these settings, international students are positioned as co-constructors of knowledge, rather than as recipients of dominant theories. This mode of engagement helps to challenge the authority of universalist assumptions and foreground alternative epistemologies as vital to academic inquiry.

Pedagogical approaches and their impact on knowledge production

When I began my fieldwork in the UK and attended the first class of M1, Janet, one of the lecturers, highlighted that the number of international students had increased in recent years. She expressed her excitement about this development and her interest in the perspectives these students could bring to discussions. In our interview, Janet noted that international students had challenged her own views in the classroom, prompting her to reflect on her use of UK-based cultural references that might not be universally understood. She also mentioned her efforts to invite students to share insights from their own national contexts, illustrating how pedagogical choices can shape which knowledges are legitimised and how classroom authority is negotiated (see also Rogers, 2018; Wimpenny et al., 2022). Kylie (M1, Singapore), one of Janet's students, expressed enthusiasm for her classes and lecturers and shared positive experiences. However, when I asked her about the focus of class discussions and how she felt about the perspectives she encountered, including whether there was space for her own experiences from Singapore, she became more reflective about her own position in the classroom:

> Southeast Asia like East Asia, has its own theatre practices, which are I think not as well studied here because it's all like western theatre focus, which is fine. I mean, it is what it is (…) I don't know if there's no opportunity; we just never got to talk about it … to share what other theatre cultures are like in East Asia, Southeast Asia. A lot of the discussions here are like western theatre (…) Now that I think about it, back home we do a lot of UK scripts or US scripts, and we learn a lot about what western theatre is, but the reverse isn't really done here.

As we heard from Kylie, the emphasis was primarily on hegemonic theory and the dominant systems within the UK and the USA theatre industries. During classes, Janet predominantly referred to one student, Carla, when drawing on case examples or attempting to incorporate different perspectives. By frequently using Carla, who had completed her undergraduate degree in the USA, as a reference point, Janet seemed to reinforce the narrative of the US theatre system, primarily drawing on class examples that highlighted the similarities and differences between the UK and USA contexts. This focus on Carla not only shaped the discussions around eurocentric frameworks but also narrowed the exploration of alternative theatrical practices, leaving little room for the diverse cultural insights that students like Kylie could have contributed from their own experiences and backgrounds.

This dynamic shows how international classrooms are shaped not just by students' backgrounds but also by the institutional structures and pedagogical cultures of the host institution, which frame what counts as legitimate knowledge (Spangler & Adriansen, 2021). It shows the uneven legitimisation of epistemologies, where certain knowledges, often those already aligned with dominant discourses, are rendered visible, while others remain obscured or ignored. In line with de Sousa Santo's (2014) notion of 'abyssal thinking', Kylie's experience exemplifies how alternative knowledge systems are positioned on the 'other side' of the epistemic divide. When Janet consistently draws on Carla, this may signal to the rest of the class that her knowledge is more highly valued and relevant, potentially discouraging other students from sharing their own cultural experiences or insights. This pattern could reinforce existing biases within the curriculum, where hegemonic perspectives are privileged, while the

international viewpoints, such as those from Southeast Asia, remain underrepresented. Moreover, Kylie's comment about the lack of discussion on Southeast Asian theatre practices highlights a gap in the curriculum that Janet's teaching approach might inadvertently perpetuate. While Janet expressed a desire to include diverse perspectives, the classroom dynamics suggest that without deliberate efforts to engage a wider array of students' voices, many valuable insights may go unheard.

Ryan (2011) notes that lecturers teaching international students must recognise that they are shaped by the cultural, academic, and social traditions of their host systems, which are not universal. Similarly, Tange (2008) argues that intercultural awareness among lecturers is a prerequisite for successful internationalisation. This awareness begins with the decolonisation of the individual academic (Wimpenny et al., 2022). Lecturers need to critically engage with their own positionalities, worldviews, and values, as these practices affect their self-awareness and, in turn, shape their classroom, and curriculum practices. Decolonisation involves critically engaging with knowledge to question the colonial roots of curricula and university practices, leading to a renewed understanding of language, culture, and history (du Preez, 2018; Le Grange, 2016). It can be seen as a strategic response in HE to deconstruct, uncentre, and challenge the dominance of hegemonic knowledge, research, and pedagogy. At this juncture, it is also important to address the potential critiques that international students may come to western countries specifically to learn about dominant theories and approaches (Ma, 2020), which, as I have already noted, was indeed the case for the majority of my participants. This is also illustrated by Kylie, who–only after I prompted her to reflect more explicitly on the focus of their discussions and her own knowledge – admitted that she had not been considering these aspects, given that she had come to learn about the system as situated within the UK context. While Kylie demonstrated a strong understanding of her own country's context and elaborated on historical developments during our interview, it is also possible that international students may not always be well-versed in the theories, ways of knowing, and approaches from their own countries. This situation may arise precisely because of the prevailing dominance of hegemonic theory in academic discourse, as Kylie also highlighted, reflecting how students' knowledge trajectories are often already shaped by colonial legacies before their arrival.

Charlotte, a lecturer in Germany, described her approach to working with students as *partnerschaftlich* (German: working together as partners). While she attributed this more specifically to master's students, who are more advanced in their studies, she also connected her approach, such as allowing freedom in their choice of essay topics and the development of weekly course content, to the international group in particular:

> I believe that's probably my approach, especially with this international group, trying not to prescribe too much because I feel I wouldn't be doing them justice otherwise. Maybe I'm sometimes a bit too liberal, or not strict enough, but I think it's important and good. In fact, I'd actually like to see even more of the different bodies of knowledge from the diverse university cultures they come from being incorporated into the course, so that they can become more visible.

Each week, students presented a specific topic and subsequently facilitated a class discussion. Over the course of several weeks, the seminars were largely student-led, with Charlotte contributing by introducing key concepts and theories. Additionally, she

encouraged the students to discuss in smaller groups how they wished to approach the seminar topics and whether they had any particular preferences. This feedback was then shared with the entire group, allowing the themes and structures of the seminars to be shaped by the students' interests and perspectives. Reflecting on his experiences in the seminars, Jeffrey (M6, Canada) emphasised a sense of freedom in exploring class content and discovering knowledge:

> Here it feels like the structure to be less structured and to allow you that more creative approach. It's like freedom (…) Here you feel like you have to go and discover what data you need to crunch.

While Tina (M6, South Asia[1]) also shared this perspective of freely exploring a topic, she additionally highlighted the sense of equality between peers and lecturers during class discussions:

> You just explore the topic more and you get to know more (…) I can say whatever I want as long as it's course related, you know, ethically and morally correct for the class environment (…) I think in most of the courses that I've attended it's more like a dialogue and discussion rather than having like a dominant perspective because I know people are commenting on something and then there are people who disagree, and they have another opinion which is also accepted.

These students' experiences reflect a more relational and dialogic learning space, aligning with Freirean notions of co-intentional education, in which all participants engage as both learners and knowers. In contrast to Janet's approach, Charlotte's case illustrates how pedagogical processes can redistribute authority and open space for epistemic dialogue. Here, pedagogy acts as a process that mediates towards more equitable knowledge production, showing how macro-level calls for internationalisation can translate into genuinely plural epistemic practices. This participatory structure also resonates with Madge et al.'s (2015) conceptualisation of pedagogic spaces as 'powerful focal points' (p. 688) for negotiating meaning and legitimacy in international education; spaces where students actively intervene, challenge, and co-construct knowledge, shaping not only discussions but also the epistemic environment itself. In Denmark, as previously described, students primarily worked in groups on projects and participated in class discussions, yet they had limited involvement in class design and seminar leadership. While many noted that they could critique ideas and found lecturers receptive, these opportunities remained structured and partial, illustrating how even seemingly participatory spaces can maintain underlying epistemic hierarchies. By contrast, UK courses were more transmissive, offering fewer avenues for students to shape content, highlighting how institutional structures and pedagogical styles mediate the extent to which international students can act as active knowledge agents. Although M1 featured more interactive teaching methods within seminars, it still operated within a more traditional framework, characterised by inputs from lecturers and students acting primarily as recipients within a lecture-centred approach. This was also true for M2, which some international students described as 'just being talked at'

[1] Tina requested that her country not be specified to maintain her anonymity. For this reason, I refer to her region instead.

and expressed difficulties in grasping the content. In Germany, one might argue that classes were also largely based on conventional western ideals of active participation and plenary discussions. However, pedagogical authority was redistributed, creating an environment where students actively directed discussions, selected topics, and transformed the classroom into a space of co-created knowledge in which their contributions shaped the construction and negotiation of meaning. This kind of pedagogical openness illustrates the potential of classrooms to function as mobile epistemic spaces, sites where knowledge is not merely delivered but actively negotiated and co-created across cultural, linguistic, and national differences. It echoes de Sousa Santos' (2014) vision of an 'ecology of knowledges', in which diverse epistemic traditions are not peripheral but central to academic practice, co-existing in dialogue rather than in competition.

Examining the three field sites reveals important insights into how lecturers engage with students and their expectations regarding adherence to specific pedagogical approaches. In the UK and Denmark, although individual lecturers expressed a desire to incorporate 'more international perspectives' into their teaching, they also exhibited ethnocentric pedagogical tendencies. These patterns may reflect the limits of their prior training and professional socialisation rather than a deliberate assertion of cognitive injustice. Consciously or unconsciously, this leads educators to overlook alternative educational methods (Tange, 2008), manifesting in expectations for students to adapt to existing teaching and learning practices without active involvement. For example, Anja (M3, Danish), a lecturer in Denmark, said during our interview:

> In our teaching [we] are trying to be as non-hierarchical as we can. So, we really like them to engage in discussions, but I think that some cultures would find it really hard to discuss with teachers (…) But I'm not spending lots of time on addressing this as an issue. I'm basically just assuming that it's ... or just saying, OK, this is how we are teaching (…) We are trying to make this nice teaching environment, and we need some critical discussions, so, we hope that you would engage with us.

The quote reflects Anja's expectation that international students will engage with her teaching style and classroom environment without extensive modifications to established routines. By stating that she is 'basically just assuming' students will engage, she signals a reliance on her familiar practices rather than actively reshaping them in response to students' needs. Her emphasis on creating a 'nice teaching environment' suggests she anticipates students will respond positively to the atmosphere itself. These practices may mirror broader systemic patterns within Danish HE, and the Nordic region more generally, where a longstanding image of egalitarianism and pedagogical progressiveness can obscure subtle expectations of conformity. Research indicates that dominant epistemologies continue to be valorised, while alternative knowledges are often marginalised or rendered invisible. As Conolly et al. (2025) argue, educators may inadvertently reproduce these patterns, reflecting a structural reluctance to engage with issues of coloniality, race, and epistemic hierarchy.

Furthermore, differences in learning environments significantly shaped how students collaborated and engaged with one another, ultimately influencing the ways in which knowledge was produced and shared. In Denmark, group work was a central element of the pedagogical approach, often structured around project-based learning that culminated in final presentations. While this approach is often framed as progressive and student-centred, its

implementation in international classrooms proved more ambivalent. Several international students expressed frustration, with many opting to work with friends or peers from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds to ensure smoother collaboration. At the same time, lecturers themselves expressed uncertainty about how best to support group formation within international cohorts. Although intended to foster collaboration, such structures can, in practice, limit engagement with difference if not carefully facilitated. In the UK, limited classroom interaction created a noticeable distance among students. During interviews, some students conveyed negative attitudes towards their peers, suggesting that they perceived others as relying on them for help due to a lack of understanding of the assignments. This sentiment was particularly evident in M2, where students expressed frustration with their classmates, labelling some as lazy and feeling that their contributions were not genuinely reciprocal. Additionally, students refrained from sharing information about exam results or assignments, further deepening their sense of disconnection. In contrast, the majority of students in Germany viewed their interactions as collaborative, cross-cultural, and open. For example, Marek (M5, Mexico) noted,

> I do feel like the collaborativeness of the programme is one of its main strengths and how the whole programme is designed about that. If you don't collaborate, you're not going to succeed because there's just so much work (…) You have to rely on other people (…) And I think I'm getting that a lot in school.

Rather than internationalisation itself, it is the organisation of teaching within internationalised spaces that shapes whether students' diverse experiences are engaged as epistemically valuable (Liu, 2023; Madge et al., 2009; Madge et al., 2015). When pedagogical structures create opportunities for relational learning and reciprocal exchange, knowledge production can become a situated and collaborative process. These dynamics are shaped not only by institutional structures but also by the social relations that unfold in the classroom. They reflect the mobile spatial conditions of knowledge production (Raghuram, 2013), in which knowledge emerges through encounters shaped by movement, location, and pedagogical design. While internationalisation may provide the conditions for diverse perspectives to come together, it is ultimately the pedagogical approach that determines whether these encounters become sites of epistemic engagement. The contrasting experiences across the contexts illustrate how teaching practices, institutional arrangements, and the wider educational environment – including the influence of home institutions – collectively shape students' opportunities to engage with difference and exercise epistemic agency, thereby influencing how internationalisation is lived in practice.

Conclusion

Building on Stein's (2017) argument that internationalisation, while often framed as transformative, can reproduce existing epistemic hierarchies, this paper highlighted how internationalised classrooms serve as sites where knowledge is negotiated, contested, and co-constructed in practice. Micro-level negotiations, shaped by institutional structures, lecturers' practices, and students' diverse trajectories, illustrated the contingent and relational nature of cognitive (in)justice, revealing both the persistence of hegemonic knowledge frameworks and the openings for alternative epistemologies to emerge (Connell, 2006; de

Sousa Santos, 2014). The analysis revealed apparent variations between the institutions and national contexts represented in the study. In Germany, lecturers were more likely to invite international students to shape the direction of seminars, fostering collaborative engagement and reflexivity. This flexibility was supported by institutional structures that afforded greater academic freedom. In contrast, UK lecturers worked within the constraints of a marketised HE system, where rigid course outlines and institutional branding limited opportunities for curriculum responsiveness. The global prestige of the UK's educational system may also reinforce an attitude where international students are expected to learn from, rather than challenge, established eurocentric theories, thereby limiting their opportunities to broaden or question these dominant knowledge frameworks. Meanwhile, Denmark's educational system, often seen as progressive and egalitarian due to its emphasis on student participation and democratic dialogue (see Frønes et al., 2020), also imposed subtle expectations for students' cultural and academic adaptation.

A key implication is the need to move beyond superficial diversity initiatives and reimagine pedagogy as a site of epistemic engagement and transformation, as Stein (2025) argues, requiring not just apologies but a rethinking of academic spaces to actively value diverse knowledge systems and perspectives (see also Schildermans, 2023). This calls for institutions and lecturers to actively question dominant knowledge systems and reflect on whose perspectives are legitimised in the classroom. The German context offers some suggestive practices, including collaborative syllabus design, space for student-led discussions, and recognition of diverse positionalities, but these remain relatively rare. A more widespread commitment to cognitive justice would require structural changes, not only in how courses are taught, but also in how curricula are shaped, which epistemologies are legitimised, and how authority and voices are negotiated in classroom interactions. As Davanna et al. (2025) remind us, any effort to decolonise or reimagine pedagogy must also contend with the marketised and managerial realities of contemporary universities, where bureaucratic demands and consumer logics often constrain reflexive and transformative teaching. Meaningful change, therefore, requires not only curricular reform but also a willingness to confront these wider structural conditions that shape what kinds of epistemic engagements are possible. Drawing on de Sousa Santos' (2014) call for an ecology of knowledges, this paper advocates for pedagogies that encourage mutual respect and engagement among different epistemologies, rather than reinforcing the dominance of hegemonic ways of knowing. This does not entail the rejection of western knowledge but repositioning it as one perspective among many, within pluralistic and dialogic academic spaces (R'boul, 2022; Rogers, 2018). Yet, fostering students' epistemic agency cannot rely solely on the universities they attend abroad. Their prior educational contexts and support structures are also crucial in enabling them to develop confidence, reflexivity, and critical engagement needed to claim epistemic space.

This paper thus suggests that reimagining pedagogy in internationalised HE requires concrete, reparative practices (see also Sriprakash, 2023). For example, Velásquez Atehortúa (2020) shows how critical pedagogy can transform classrooms into 'contact zones' where subaltern voices challenge disciplinary hierarchies; Mansoor and Bano (2019) demonstrate how students in Pakistan used decolonially designed worksheets and supplementary texts to unsettle western literary canons and re-centre their epistemic agency; and Eriksen et al. (2024) illustrate how integrating Indigenous perspectives through collaborative and reflexive practices can foster relational engagement with knowledge production. Such approaches not

only empower students to claim their epistemic agency but also provide lecturers with structured tools for self-reflection, supporting ongoing critical engagements with their own positionalities and pedagogical assumptions (see also Liu, 2023; Rogers, 2018).

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Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to my participants for sharing their experiences with such generosity. Your willingness to engage with this research has been both inspiring and profoundly enriching. I also want to thank my PhD supervisors, Rachel Brooks, Paul Hodkinson, and Sazana Jayadeva, for their guidance along the way. Finally, I acknowledge the support of the Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, for funding this research.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, supporting data are not available for ethical reasons.

AI Statement

This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies. All text and figures are generated exclusively by the author.

Funding

This project was funded by the Department of Sociology, University of Surrey.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no competing interests.

Article History

Submitted: 24.06.2025
Accepted: 15.11.2025
Published: 07.01.2026