

PRACTICE ARTICLE

Navigating Complex Challenges in GHE: Reflections on the GlobalEd Early Career Research Fellowship

Gian-Louis Hernandez*

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands

g.hernandez@hva.nl

ORCID: 0000-0002-7196-9957

*Corresponding author

Kombe Kapatamoyo

Unaffiliated researcher, The United States

kombekapatamoyo@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0007-4953-4926

Josiah Koh

Western Sydney University The College, Australia

z.koh@westernsydney.edu.au

ORCID: 0000-0002-2380-0348

Rebecca Hovey

Trinity College, The United States

rebecca.hovey@trincoll.edu

Bryan McAllister-Grande

Harvard Graduate School of Education, The United States

Founder and Director, GlobalEd

bwm561@mail.harvard.edu

ORCID: 0000-0003-3202-7155

Abstract

This article reflects on the GlobalEd Early Career Research Fellowship's capacity to create supportive environments where Fellows address pressing issues at the intersection of theory and practice. By emphasizing the importance of breaking down disciplinary silos, the program encourages the cross-pollination of ideas from fields such as artificial intelligence, global health, and critical theory, thereby generating new knowledge and frameworks for understanding contemporary educational challenges. The Fellowship's praxis-oriented focus enables participants to infuse their course designs with the latest theoretical insights and practical applications, equipping them with the tools to enact institutional change. Gaps in the existing literature on faculty

development in GHE are acknowledged, particularly concerning decolonial and transformative frameworks. Such reflections underscore the need for a more equitable approach to professional development that considers systemic inequities in higher education. As the ECRF responds to these needs, it promotes essential values of epistemic plurality and inclusivity. Ultimately, this piece advocates for collaborative efforts in GHE that embrace innovative pedagogies, thus empowering stakeholders to address the multifaceted challenges facing the field and to foster educational practices that are both equitable and transformative.

Keywords: Critical being, global health, artificial intelligence, AI, GlobalEd

Introduction

The GlobalEd Early Career Research Fellowship (ECRF) program emerged as a critical intervention in contemporary higher education, challenging institutional fragmentation. The Fellowship is a flagship program of GlobalEd, an organization devoted to democratizing Global Higher Education (GHE). Founded in 2022, GlobalEd is a digital, alternative academy, anchored by eight to ten Visiting Faculty – senior scholars and practitioners – and the Early Career Research Fellows. GlobalEd offers online courses, an upcoming Certificate Program, and a collaboration platform for building joint projects, from research to teaching to institutional partnerships. This Fellowship recognizes that meaningful engagement with GHE requires a fundamental reimagining of how knowledge is produced, transmitted, and applied, and connects scholarly inquiry with pedagogical practice.

We understand GHE as a dynamic and contested field of knowledge production and dissemination, shaped unevenly by political, social, and institutional discourses (Marginson, 2022). Moving beyond nation-to-nation knowledge exchange, GHE contains a multiplicity of digital and physical networks that shape flows of knowledge and power (Altbach et al., 2019), inflected and constrained by current colonial relations of power (Shahjahan et al., 2022). The program's commitment to breaking down artificial boundaries between theory and practice reflects deeper understandings that challenges facing higher education today - from access and equity to the definition of legitimate knowledge - cannot be addressed through conventional academic approaches alone.

ECRFs are selected for promising research contributions to GHE, broadly understood. We, the authors, are three Research Fellows and two senior academic mentors. We spent a year in a virtual residency designing separate online courses and with a modest stipend. At the end of the fellowship, the course is made available to everyone via <https://myglobaled.org/>. The Fellowship's design recognizes that early career scholars occupy a strategic position within the academic ecosystem, bringing fresh perspectives to debates, while grappling with the institutional pressures that shape scholarly careers. Through monthly mentorship sessions and collaborative course development, Fellows engage in a novel form of intellectual apprenticeship. The program's virtual residency structure creates sustained dialogue about fundamental questions: What constitutes the "field" of GHE? How do we navigate the tension between scholarly rigor and activist engagement? These conversations

acknowledge knowledge production as political while maintaining commitment to intellectual integrity.

The Fellowship program responds to an "era of conformity" within higher education - a moment when institutional pressures toward standardization and market-driven metrics constrain the very intellectual diversity that universities claim to champion. By creating opportunities for Fellows to develop activist-oriented scholarship, the program acknowledges that meaningful research in GHE cannot remain politically neutral. Instead, it must tackle questions of power, access, and justice embedded within educational institutions. Our reflections are a result of our lived experience in GlobalEd. This piece consists of an outline of the context, and our personal reflections which support the discussion and conclusion. We finish with reflective suggestions for educators.

Global Trends and Challenges in Higher Education

GlobalEd's ECRF program models new ways of working and advancing thought in GHE through interdisciplinary dialogue across institutional boundaries. Recently, the more commonly referenced field of international higher education has been rethought by Heleta and Chasi (2023) as GHE, from a functional analysis of the internationalization of academic institutions, to promoting epistemic plurality and "equitable and transformative" practices as the purpose of higher education for advancing social change (Levy, 2023).

If we understand the purpose and vision of GHE as creating epistemologically inclusive spaces for teaching and research, how do we support emerging scholars and practitioners in this work? How can new approaches to professional development such as the ECRF program help the field to innovate?

Literature on faculty and professional development in GHE is minimal, even in traditional settings. Extensive work cites the general benefits of mentoring, peer support, and communities of practice for faculty development (Irby, et al, 2020; Chen et al, 2022; Coria-Navia & Moncrieff, 2021). Research on supporting faculty in international education focuses on several factors: strategies for university internationalization (Childress, 2018), the logistics of operating international education programs (Gillespie et al, 2020), intercultural skills for faculty (Sherman et al., 2024), critique of the hegemonic "westernized" academy (Fleras, 2021) and a philosophical debate regarding the narrow emphasis on the teaching & learning practices involved in faculty work (Evans, 2023).

Few models extend decolonial and transformative frameworks to professional development to address current challenges in GHE. Sanderson (2008) focused on internationalizing the concept of the "authentic self" (Cranton, 2001), as critical for the transformational potential of the "cosmopolitan" educator and their students. Like Mezirow's (2018) transformative learning model, this requires intensive reflective practice, yet Mezirow's model applied to academic career development does not address broader structural inequities of higher education.

Possibilities for GHE require adaptations of inquiry and pedagogies as reflections on the multiple ways our identities are expressed as members of a broader, global academic community. Through reflecting on and sharing their work in its

diverse manifestations in research, teaching and pedagogical innovation, as GlobalEd Fellows we enriched our thinking and approaches to our respective projects.

Reflections

The following sections outline how each of us approached our GlobalEd course development and subject matter. GL provides an outline of extending critical thinking in higher education to “Critical Being,” which Kombe expands upon in her section that critically contextualizes Global Health. Finally, Josiah continues the reflections with his own engagement with AI in education, before we identify parallels and distinctions between approaches. We end by synthesizing what this means for GHE and providing some qualified recommendations.

Critical Pedagogy

GL: My offering speaks to the intertwined nature of embodied knowledge and critical being. This section is an autoethnographic reflection on the creative process of creating my course within the GlobalEd fellowship, and the individual and structural aspects that highlight how the course and this reflective piece engage with GHE.

The course that I developed, *Learning Through Critical Being* emphasizes three facets of being critical: critical thinking (knowledge), critical reflection (self), and critical action (the world) (Barnett, 2015; Wilson & Howitt, 2018). In selecting this topic, I addressed scholar-practitioners and the broader public of potential learners. I refer to ‘student-teacher’ or ‘teacher-student’, Freirean constructions that highlight the role all individuals play in educational contexts, to highlight the dynamic and mutually constitutive nature of knowledge production in classroom settings (Freire, 1996). My course and experience of developing it testify to how being a critical individual requires thought *and* action, from the body into the world.

Critical being as holistic engagement with the world means challenging traditional knowledge dissemination models. The development of this course was an exercise in an alternative knowledge platform, as the intent was to globally disseminate this content.

The course design was shaped by the supportive environment fostered by GlobalEd, particularly during our meetings. The mentorship offered by the senior academics attending the sessions, and the unique expertise offered by my co-Fellows sharpened my understanding of critical being as a holistic endeavor.

The process also had individual and structural challenges. First, the role of bodily experience in knowledge production shapes individual challenges. We are not disembodied vessels of knowledge, for each of us carries our body with us as we move through (international) space. Some, due to historical, colonial power dynamics, are rendered invisible (Hernandez, 2023). Also, material, bodily practices, and knowledge dissemination are profoundly interconnected. For example, this text was transcribed from a recording made on a rainy walk to the pharmacy to collect medication to treat depression. I then read and reflected upon it before sitting down to write and further explore my ideas. Thus, my contribution is produced through my physical and mental engagement with the world. This visceral engagement with knowledge emphasizes thinking as occurring within lived human lives, not as an

abstract endeavor. Too often, the body is relegated to second place behind the mind in academic practice. However, scholars emphasize that embodiment actively influences education, particularly international higher education (O'Loughlin, 2006; Waters et al., 2024). The development of my course on *Critical Being* reflects how our existence fights against the erasure of mind-only knowledge production.

Structural challenges are also situated in embodied social relations. As many scholars, scholar-practitioners, and teacher-students attest, time, resources, and attention affect course completion. This collaborative effort occurred amidst career changes, illness, and life changes, characterized by structural academic precarity (Hernandez & da Silva Canavarro, 2025). As an individual, I faced the privileges and disadvantages of being an international academic, such as the lack of security in academic work (Schaer, 2020), which informed how I shaped and promoted the course. Undergirding this endeavor was my desire to provide the kind of education I view as necessary for student-teachers across the globe. I often say that my North Star is to be the kind of person I needed to see when I was younger. This ethos guides my educational work, including this course, and can and should inform how others engage with it.

Regional Specificities and Contextual Practices in Global Health

Kombe: Creating courses that address artificial intelligence (AI), critical thinking, and global health demands an intricate balance of technological innovation, pedagogical strategies, and a strong commitment to equitable and just practices. Course creators must navigate complex intersections of global trends, local contexts, and ever-present challenges of health disparities and systemic inequities.

Global health initiatives have prioritized technology in interventions, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) in recent years. However, like previous technological solutions, AI alone cannot address the underlying determinants of global health inequities (Shipton & Vitale, 2024). Course creators can design curricula that balance the promise of AI with critical insights into its limitations. This requires thoughtful integration of equitable principles, ensuring that students understand how AI applications can either perpetuate or dismantle health inequities, depending on how they are implemented. For example, Europe's policy frameworks often emphasize ethical AI deployment (Castelnovo et al., 2022), and course creators can draw from these frameworks to educate students on biases inherent in AI systems and the importance of equitable design and implementation. This enhances critical thinking and prepares students to approach global health challenges with nuanced understandings of technology's potential.

Critical thinking in health involves actively analyzing and evaluating information related to health issues, considering various perspectives, social determinants, power dynamics, and potential biases to form informed conclusions and develop effective solutions (Papathanasiou et al., 2014). This practice considers the complex political, economic, and cultural contexts that influence health disparities worldwide. Incorporating this into course development requires creators to embed diverse perspectives and encourage students to question assumptions, assess biases, and consider systemic health factors.

In North America, educational institutions often emphasize critical thinking in learning, centering equity and social justice by including diverse voices and case studies, by for instance, focusing on marginalized communities' experiences (Devine &

Ash, 2022). Reflecting on these practices allowed us as course creators to design modules that inspire learners to engage deeply with the underlying causes of health challenges through case studies.

Our collaboration in developing interconnected global health courses has fostered rich professional development through shared reflection, interdisciplinary exchange, and mutual learning. Each Fellow brings a unique regional lens and thematic focus, yet our work intersects around core principles of equity, justice, and pedagogical innovation. For example, the Fellows' courses underscore the necessity of aligning technological advancement with ethical frameworks and DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion). This prompted me to critically reflect on how technologies are deployed across different regions, reinforcing or disrupting systemic health inequities. The collaborative environment enabled Fellows to draw from shared case studies to inform one another's course design. These regional examples deepened each Fellow's understanding of contextual specificity and encourage the cross-pollination of pedagogical strategies that enhance critical thinking, such as integrating real-world case studies and encouraging students to examine systemic determinants of health.

Through iterative feedback, interdisciplinary dialogue, and shared commitment to transformative education, our collective work reflects a dynamic development process that strengthens individual courses and enriches global higher education. Our collaboration reflects trends in global higher education essential in preparing future health professionals for the complex health challenges of our time.

AI in Education

Josiah: For the ECRF, I developed a course on *AI in Education*. This reflection explores how digital education tools, such as COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) and AI-enhanced learning environments, contribute to inclusivity and innovation, while also addressing challenges like digital access disparities.

COIL fosters global collaboration, enabling students to engage across borders and cultures through online platforms. By leveraging digital tools, COIL creates opportunities for students in diverse regions to work together, breaking down physical and cultural barriers, and helps develop intercultural competencies and shared global perspectives (Rubin and Guth, 2015). This aligns with the ECRF's commitment to inclusivity, as digital education enables marginalized groups to access opportunities, particularly for students facing barriers due to geographic isolation, disability, or socioeconomic disadvantage.

In designing the *AI in Education* course, I integrated AI tools as a pedagogical inquiry into the role of automation in learning. AI-driven platforms such as neuro-linguistic programming-based feedback systems, engagement trackers, and generative tutoring agents were piloted in formative tasks, allowing students to receive adaptive support. These tools exemplify what Fadel et al. (2019) term "AI-enabled formative assessment," empowering learners to reflect and iterate without requiring constant human intervention. The course development was deeply collaborative, shaped by ongoing ECRF dialogue. Peer feedback from Fellows working in digital equity, internationalisation, and policy reform informed key decisions, such as ensuring transparency in algorithmic feedback and providing multilingual chatbot support (Koh et al., 2024).

The iterative course design was a shared, interdisciplinary effort. Monthly ECRF meetings created a sustained, reflective space for challenging assumptions and

integrating diverse perspectives. These sessions became incubators for collaborative thinking—where ideas were co-constructed, reshaped, and often reimaged entirely. The reflexive insights I gained from these discussions - on surveillance, student agency, and the ethics of educational AI - were crucial in refining the course and responding to the lived realities of global learners.

Despite the promise of digital education, structural inequities persist. Many learners still lack access to reliable internet or appropriate devices, reinforcing disparities in participation and achievement (Selwyn, 2016). AI's development pace requires ongoing professional development and collaboration across domains. The ECRF's interdisciplinary framework provided a collaborative infrastructure and theoretical grounding for praxis—highlighting how early-career scholars can collectively prototype, critique, and refine innovations in real time.

Digital education, particularly through COIL and AI-mediated learning, holds immense potential for promoting inclusion and innovation in higher education. The ECRF's emphasis on interdisciplinary, co-creative practice offers a compelling model for overcoming barriers and designing ethical and effective educational futures. By integrating digital tools and fostering genuine cross-cultural collaboration, we can help ensure that transformative educational experiences are accessible to all.

Discussion and Conclusion

Global educators must incorporate urgently criticality and praxis in curricula. The courses designed by the three GlobalEd ECRF represent innovative approaches to incorporate this imperative. The design process allowed each fellow to effectively communicate pressing issues within sub-fields, while relying on collective knowledge to generate examples of courses for future generations of interdisciplinary scholars.

As problems such as a lack of critical thought and access to material and digital resources persist globally, our reflections help create awareness around how to approach these issues. This reflection provides some directions on how global educators can pursue equitable approaches to course development.

Tensions between quality education and financial sustainability require careful thinking. To create and sustain equitable access to digital education, challenges are immense, as the *AI in Education* course highlights. In our practice, we found it challenging to balance providing quality courses with the capitalist need to generate revenue. While the GlobalEd courses is not financially motivated, the infrastructure for our courses requires financial investment.

We recognize the inherent potential conflicts of interest our social positions may represent. We gave serious thought to making the courses “attractive” to potential audiences, while emphasising providing knowledge in a broader sense. Accessibility was a consistent theme of our monthly meetings; we thought critically about who could be excluded from conversations generated by participation in a GlobalEd course. Our positionalities as scholars working at Global North institutions, privileged and marginalized at various intersections of gender, race, and nationality, meant that we had to be aware of those power dynamics while constructing our courses. We hope to have incorporated an emancipatory spirit, and recognize there is always room for growth.

We must pay attention to the value these kinds of courses provide and how that value can be transferred to marginalized communities. One effort we made was to provide financial hardship scholarships, but we invite conversations about other ways HE scholars/practitioners can make GHE more equitable.

As the *Critical Being* course suggests, the embodiment of knowledge production is essential. Things as simple as a reminder to breathe deeply (try it right now, if you like) work wonders. Physical and mental well-being are not optional but vital elements of pedagogical processes, requiring contextual and holistic approach as emphasised in the course on *Global Health* suggests.

Our discussion meetings exposed how this work entails both producing educational content and the maintenance of our relationships. Checking in and building community from our own positionalities played an important role in developing these courses. We exhort anyone interested in knowledge production to provide space for such meetings, given the importance of exchanging knowledge as socially located.

This piece is a call to action to follow the thinking suggested in our courses. We encourage all stakeholders (educators, policymakers, institutions, and students) to engage with the principles that undergirded our intellectual engagement with the subject matter. For all reading this, remember that critical thinking, mental and physical health, and technology are fields that require careful engagement.

Global pressures like climate change and political division show us the demand for innovative and inclusive education to address root problems and create solutions. GHE initiatives like our GlobalEd courses provide an opportunity to engage deeply and collectively with these pressures. The potential for GHE is great; we must simply act such that equity and inclusivity become the norm.

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Acknowledgements

The authors have made no acknowledgements regarding this publication.

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(s).

Funding

The authors have not shared any financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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