

EDITORIAL

A Letter to the Editors: What Can Critical Mean to International Education Praxis?

Chrystal A. George Mwangi

George Mason University, USA

cgeorgem@gmu.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-3343-6316

*Corresponding author

Christina W. Yao

University of South Carolina, USA

cy9@mailbox.sc.edu

ORCID: 0000-0001-7572-0318

Abstract

There is no question that higher education is in turbulent times, with shifting geopolitical priorities and policy actions affecting many across the globe. As such, many international educators, including administrators and faculty, grapple with how to engage in critical praxis and practice in their day-to-day work. In this letter to the editors, we aim to acknowledge and address the many challenges facing international education in today's geopolitical realities by applying an equity-driven lens for internationalization. The original application of the lens included four guiding principles: defining the sociohistorical context, understanding contemporary forces of globalization, integrating equity-driven theoretical perspectives, and de/constructing internationalization. In adapting the lens for application to practice, we added a fifth lens: building communities of critical praxis and scholarship. Ultimately, we offer our partnership and co-conspiratorship to the JGHE readership and call on others in positions of professional protection and security to do the same.

Keywords: critical praxis, equity, international educators, internationalization

Dear international educators,

We write this piece as a letter to those who grapple with how to engage in critical praxis and practice in their day-to-day work, which includes administrators and faculty who have both formal and informal roles in international education. We arrived at this letter through our engagement with scholar-practitioners at our institutions and through global scholarship networks, such as the Critical Internationalization Students Network's (2024) Race + Racism subgroup that we co-led for several years. One point we heard many times from higher education practitioners was the question of how they can engage in critical, antiracist work within the constraints of their jobs. As some have shared, they do not feel like they have the privilege of outward and explicit criticality the way that many tenured faculty—including the two of us—or those who have other forms of contractual protections in their jobs do. In addition, they (and we) recognize that neoliberalism, which drives much of contemporary higher education operations, creates additional constraints and tensions with critical work. Within a neoliberal paradigm, many practitioners are tasked with increasing student enrollment and focusing on financial returns which can work in tension with the humanistic responsibilities of their jobs.

Beyond the global scholarship network and informal conversations with international educators, we developed an equity-driven lens for internationalization research a few years ago (George Mwangi & Yao, 2021) which we have recently begun to apply more directly to practice. The equity-driven lens includes four guiding principles, or lenses, that we argue should be addressed to move towards equity in internationalization. The first lens includes defining the sociohistorical context because internationalization cannot be separated from social and historical events, pressures, and ideologies that are embedded in current practices. We also argue that internationalization is heavily influenced by global structures and systems that often advance a neoliberal and market orientation—thus necessitating an understanding of the contemporary forces of globalization, which is the second lens. The third lens focuses on guiding educators away from practices that “reinforce internationalization as a values-neutral or indiscriminately positive process” (George Mwangi & Yao, 2021, p. 42) and towards the integration of equity-driven conceptual and theoretical perspectives. Finally, the fourth lens centers de/constructing internationalization, in which we encourage educators to nuance how internationalization is defined rather than assume what is included and excluded. As such, the four principles of the equity-driven lens can be used to shape the logics that ground the practices, policies, processes, and motivations of higher education internationalization work on campuses.

As we consider ways to adapt the equity-driven lens for application to practice, we also advance an additional lens— building communities of critical praxis and

scholarship—as a way for international educators to connect and support each other during difficult times. In the next few sections, we delve deeper into each of the five lenses with suggestions on how international educators might engage an equity-driven and critical perspective in their work.

Defining the Sociohistorical Context

As we look at the present and towards the future of international education, we cannot avoid the connection to sociohistorical contexts. For example, at the time of this writing, the second Trump administration is creating an environment of uncertainty in the United States which is reminiscent of events that occurred in his previous administration (Yao, 2024). During his first administration, international students and scholars experienced constantly and rapidly changing immigration policies, such as the travel bans, which left students and administrators rushing to adhere to new rules. We also saw a shift to conservative ideals being more visible, including anti-DEI and anti-CRT movements that affected so many in higher education. There was anti-Asian racist nativism mirroring the “Yellow Peril” of the early 19th century (Yao & George Mwangi, 2022). The second Trump administration has made sweeping changes quickly, including executive orders within the first week affecting immigration, climate change, and diversity programs (NPR, 2025). Within the first 100 days of the new administration, President Trump issued multiple executive orders that sent ripples around the world, including the threats of tariffs on multiple countries affecting the global economy (Horsley, 2025) and the sudden rescinding of international students’ and scholars’ visas (Gary & Gluckman, 2025). In addition, there are continued global challenges, including leadership changes, military strife, and the growth of far-right movements in multiple governments (Henley, 2025). There is no question that (geo)politics, both in the United States and globally, creates immense pressures on the lives of those working and studying international higher education.

In considering the sociohistorical perspectives, international educators can look to historical actions to learn from and plan for the future. We in no way suggest implementing changes without clear directions (e.g., immigration changes, etc.); however, we do believe it is essential to be aware of, and to plan for, any future possibilities by considering the past, especially considering the recent change in the U.S. presidential administration. For example, some higher education institutions recommended that international students return from overseas travel to the United States prior to the 2025 Inauguration Day on January 20, even if their university/course schedule did not require it (Alonso, 2024). This suggestion is in direct response to immigration policies that were

Journal of Global Higher Education, 1(1)

changed quickly after Trump was inaugurated in his first administration. Likewise, our recommendation to international educators is to always consider sociohistorical precedents to center equity and criticality in their day-to-day work.

Connecting to Contemporary Forces of Globalization

In considering the contemporary forces of globalization, we know that international educators not only serve a critical role on college campuses but are often the first ones to know any major global news impacting higher education. Most importantly, they are typically the first people that international students and scholars reach out to any time there are potentially stressful situations. In a recent study that we conducted, we examined the perspectives of international educators and how they navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we sought to understand how they supported international students on their campuses during that time, particularly in light of changing immigration policies and the rise in anti-Asian sentiments occurring around the globe. As we engaged in interviews with international educators, we were struck by how many participants shared the trauma they experienced during the pandemic (George Mwangi et al., 2024)—especially in relation to the constraints they experienced in supporting international students who had so many questions at the time.

As we listened, we saw the deep level of commitment that international educators had for their students, despite the lack of institutional support, as well as the lack of resources and answers at the time. Yet, international educators had to balance multiple roles, including supporting students while simultaneously responding to federally mandated governmental responsibilities (Yao et al., 2024). Even though the study occurred several years ago during the pandemic, the experiences shared by international educators are applicable to the contemporary challenges of navigating current geopolitical events. The massive changes in immigration policies and global partnerships have understandably caused turmoil to all affected, including those formally and informally working in international education.

We recognize and respect the difficult work that international educators must do on a daily basis. We know that there are many competing priorities at work, and that infusing criticality can be difficult, time consuming, and sometimes feels impossible, particularly when navigating geopolitical and global pressures. Yet, we urge international educators to remain committed to work that fosters positive transformation. This could include serving global student populations with care and patience even during tenuous times, which is when students may experience high levels of anxiety and stress.

Integrating Equity-Driven Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

There are obvious challenges and tensions in working within a higher education system while also seeking to critique, change, or even dismantle aspects of it. In doing the work within universities, or within organizations that support the work of universities (e.g., third-party education abroad providers) employees will still be beholden in some ways to those systems. This reality leads to us often getting asked by international educators, “How can we make your critical research actionable?” and “How can I use a critical lens as a practitioner?” We have found the work of education activist scholars and practitioners in the K-12/primary and secondary education space to be particularly useful guides, such as Paolo Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and bell hooks’ (2003) *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. Like the essence of international education, these works emphasize learning inside and outside of the traditional classroom and into the community. They also offer ways in which we can engage in change and transformation within ourselves and our spheres of influence as important starting points for critical practice.

De/constructing Internationalization

Use of the equity-driven lens of de/constructing helps us to remember that there is no single way to understand, define, or practice criticality. Criticality is an ontological and epistemological stance, meaning that it guides what we believe is real, what shapes our understanding of reality, what we value as knowledge, and how we seek knowledge. In practice, the application of a critical perspective to internationalization has an expansive and pluralistic range (Stein & McCartney, 2021; Vavrus & Pekol, 2015). You might engage as a tempered radical who is committed to your organization/ institution but are also at odds with aspects of the culture and practices within that space, working towards change as an outsider within (Meyerson, 2001). You might see yourself as an accomplice who turns toward risk in order to strategize with oppressed peoples and leverage one’s power and resources to dismantle structures through your role (Powell & Kelly, 2017). There is no “right” label or singular way to practice criticality, but it is important to consistently reflect on the alignment and tensions between who you are, what you believe, and how you act. We would argue that criticality is a process and journey of becoming, rather than a destination. Further, being critical does not mean that

we as scholars and practitioners should judge one another as we continue to learn, grow, and develop in that becoming.

While there are few models that discuss how practitioners can engage criticality in practice, they do exist. For example, Liu's (2023) article, "International education for the oppressed: A framework for international educators' value-based practice," is grounded in Freire's (1970) critical work. Liu (2023) specifically guides practitioners towards practice that aligns with their value systems; these practices focus on deep reflections regarding critical awareness raising "of the oppressive postcolonial world conditions in higher education internationalization," (p. 948) determining and applying ethical values, and engaging in empathetic actions "to gradually transform the system" (p. 946). Stein and colleagues (2019) provide another practical perspective in their article, "Pluralizing frameworks for global ethics in the internationalization of higher education in Canada," by not only describing three frameworks, but also demonstrating what each framing might look like when applied in practice to internationalizing the curriculum, international student mobility, and study and service abroad. Instead of promoting any single one of the three frameworks – liberal, critical, and decolonial – they instead use them as a guide towards ethical questions that practitioners can reflect upon within their work.

It is also important to remember that theorizing, framings, and knowledge does not just come from empirical research or journal articles. All of your professional experience and knowledge, alongside the ways you have navigated criticality in your work, are valuable ways of knowing. Researchers and practitioners should continue to find ways to collaborate in bridging theory and practice so that our diverse ways of engaging criticality within international education are shared within our communities.

Building Communities of Critical Praxis and Scholarship

We recognize that critical work within internationalization cannot be done alone, and therefore in writing this letter to you we offer a new lens: building communities of critical praxis and scholarship. It is important to find community with other scholars and practitioners who are committed to a critical stance within international education. Higher education institutions and their adjacent spaces can be very isolating, which can make you feel as if you are alone in the challenges that you face. Other critical professionals who are experiencing similar issues can serve as thought partners in your decision making, accountability buddies in not compromising your values in your work, and friends who care for you (and vice versa) as you navigate your profession. These

communities can be essential for your own mental health and well-being in order to stave off the broader trends of professional burnout and withdrawal occurring within the field of international education (Toner, 2022). Given the current sociopolitical climate that reflects the rise of global nationalism, building communities of critical practice and scholarship can also serve as a form of safety in mobilizing for change without taking on all of the associated risk on one's own.

The Critical Internationalization Studies Network (CISN) provides this kind of space as an organization that “brings together scholars, practitioners, educators, students, and community organizations interested in reimagining dominant patterns of relationship, representation, and resource distribution in the internationalization of education” (Critical Internationalization Studies Network, 2024). For example, we alongside Dr. Kumari Beck, co-developed a sub-group of CISN that became a global network for education scholars and practitioners interested in understanding the ways race and racism are present in higher education internationalization scholarship, policy, and practice. Each month, we met remotely to focus on a different session topic, such as “practitioner engagement with race and racism in global education” and “theoretical frameworks focused on race in a global context.” At the time of writing this article, the CISN sub-group on race and racism continues to exist as a space to share relevant scholarship and practice initiatives, engage in dialogue, build relationships, and develop actions for anti-racist praxis in higher education.

In addition, we learned from participants in our previous studies that local and national associations serve as essential communities, especially during difficult times (George Mwangi et al., 2024). Participants shared that their networks in NAFSA and AIEA were helpful as support systems for individuals who understood the difficulties of the time, as well as educators who had to navigate changing immigration policies. Although these are global organizations, we recognize they are U.S. dominant (and our research participants were U.S. based); therefore, it is important to locate the associations within your local, regional, and international contexts. While these associations may not ground themselves in a critical stance per se, over the years we have found a growing presence and visibility of critical administrators and educators in many of these spaces. We are also confident that the *Journal of Global Higher Education* will serve as an important space to both seek and share research and practice about criticality in international education.

Moving Forward Together

Today's geopolitical realities precariously impact our local, national, and global higher education contexts. We see racist nativism, xenophobia, and colonial logics

Journal of Global Higher Education, 1(1)

continue to systematically restrict possibilities for equity-driven internationalization policies and practices around the world. Thus, we recognize that criticality in international education cannot just be an intellectual exercise as there is too much stake - it is your work as practitioners that is essential for ensuring internationalization keeps pace with our rapidly changing world. We also know that many of you are not protected in your professional roles, and you should not have to bear all the costs and risks in this work. As tenured faculty members, we offer our partnership and co-conspiratorship, and we call on others in positions with professional protections and security to do the same. At the same time, we ask you to do what you can in using your skills, knowledge, and sphere of influence to enact your interpretation of a critical lens. We are at a time when we must each bring what we can offer to the table, lean on one another in these uncertain times, and connect with one another for support as none of us can do this work alone.

In solidarity,

Chrystal & Christina

References

- Alonso, J. (2024, November 26). Campuses advise international students to return by Inauguration Day. *Inside Higher Ed*.
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/global/international-students-us/2024/11/26/international-students-told-return-campus-jan-20>
- Critical Internationalization Studies Network. (2024). About.
<https://criticalinternationalization.net/>
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury Press.
- Gary, A., & Gluckman, N. (2025, April 24). Tracking Trump's actions on student visas. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/tracking-trumps-actions-on-student-visas>
- George Mwangi, C. A. & Yao, C. W. (2021). U.S. higher education internationalization through an equity driven lens: An analysis of concepts, history, and research. In L. W. Perna (Ed.) *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (vol. 36, pp. 549-609). Springer.
- George Mwangi, C. A., Yao, C. W., Harshe, G., & Corso, A. (2024). It's just too much: Narratives of international educators navigating COVID-19. *Journal of Higher Education*, 96(5), 857-881. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2024.2378643>

- Henley, J. (2025, February 1). "Vicious cycle": How far-right parties across Europe are cannibalising the centre right. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/01/vicious-cycle-far-right-parties-across-europe-are-inspiring-imitators>
- hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Psychology Press.
- Horsley, S. (2025, April 30). The U.S. economy shrinks as Trump's tariffs spark recession fears. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/30/nx-s1-5380204/trump-economy-gdp-tariffs-recession-consumers>
- Liu, W. (2023). International education for the oppressed: A framework for international educators' value-based practice. *Policy Futures in Education*, 21(8), 947-960.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103221117653>
- Meyerson, D. E. (2001). *Tempered radicals: How people use difference to inspire change at work*. Harvard Business School Press.
- NPR. (2025, January 28). All the executive orders Trump has signed after 1 week in office. NPR.
<https://www.npr.org/2025/01/28/nx-s1-5276293/trump-executive-orders>
- Powell, J. & Kelly, A. (2017) Accomplices in the academy in the age of Black Lives Matter, *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis* 6(2), 42-65.
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/jctp/vol6/iss2/>
- Kemmis, S. (2010). Research for praxis: Knowing doing. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 18(1), 9-27.
- Stein, S., Andreotti, V., & Suša, R. (2019). Pluralizing frameworks for global ethics in the internationalization of higher education in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 49(1), 22-46. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1060822ar>
- Stein, S., & McCartney, D. M. (2021). Emerging conversations in critical internationalization studies. *Journal of International Students*, 11(S1), 1-14.
<https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11iS1.3840>
- Toner, M. (2022, April 11). The "great resignation" goes global. *International Educator*.
<https://www.nafsa.org/ie-magazine/2022/4/11/great-resignation-goes-global>
- Vavrus, F., & Pekol, A. (2015). Critical internationalization: Moving from theory to practice. *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education*, 2(2), 5-21.
<http://preserve.lehigh.edu/fire/vol2/iss2/2>
- Yao, C. W. (2024, December 3). US academics: Look after foreign students. *Nature Opinion World View*. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-03912-2>
- Yao, C. W., & George Mwangi, C. A. (2022). Yellow peril and cash cows: The social positioning of Asian international students in the USA. *Higher Education*, 84(5), 1027-1044. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00814-y>

Yao, C. W., George Mwangi, C. A., Corso, A., & Harshe, G. (2024). Balancing compliance and student support: The multiple roles of international educators in the U.S. *Journal of College Student Development*, 65(6), 645-662.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2024.a944812>

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Sophia Abbott, Amanda R. Corso, and Gaurav Harshe for their work as doctoral research assistants on the study discussed within this letter. Thank you to Dr. Kumari Beck who co-founded the Critical Internationalization Studies Network sub-group on Race & Racism with us in 2020. We are grateful to all of the international educators who have shared their stories in our research and partnered with us over the years.

AI Statement

This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies.

Funding

The research study discussed in this manuscript was made possible by a grant from the Spencer Foundation [#202100254]. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Spencer Foundation.

A Letter to the Editors: What Can Critical Mean to International Education Praxis? © 2025 by George Mwangi and Yao is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>