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Golden Ages on the Horizon: International Higher Education and the Knowledge Revolution

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I recently attended the 8th International Conference on Higher Education in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on “Transforming Saudi Universities in an Era of Change.” The atmosphere was one of excitement and cooperation. The topics of the conference—the future knowledge revolution, new opportunities for women in science, Saudi Arabia’s “Vision 2030,” and the emerging fields of digital humanities and global identities—defied recent criticisms of international higher education as in a state of crisis or retreat. Today, international education is booming—but it is booming in the areas of teaching, learning, and research, beyond the old paradigm of student and scholar mobility.

The [teaching and learning of international education](#) is a misunderstood phenomenon. It delves into areas of faculty life that are still novel and perplexing to many in academia: how to integrate global learning into the classroom and curriculum; how to assess (in both qualitative and quantitative ways) the impact of international education on student learning outcomes. No single association, organization, or discipline can rightly claim the mantle of international education as a form of knowledge, which places the field both at the center and at the periphery of the academy. Because the academy continues to favor single disciplines over large-scale interdisciplinary cooperation, key areas of knowledge—such as international education and pedagogy—remain fractured and misunderstood concepts. This essay attempts to help correct the misconceptions of international education as simply mobility of people, programs, or ideas. Building upon Mestenhauser (2002; 2011), Mestenhauser and Ellingboe (1998), and recent work in the fields of international education and the arts and sciences, I argue that international education should be considered a “new discipline”—a trailblazing paradigm that upends traditional knowledge structures (McAllister-Grande 2018).

HISTORICAL ROOTS AND NEW AREAS OF SCHOLARSHIP

In the early twentieth century, international education emerged as a new area of praxis—a crucial link between the idealistic theory of international relations and the practice of fostering world peace and understanding. It has its origins in the pioneering work of structural linguists, cultural anthropologists, comparative literature scholars, educators, and psychologists (La Brack 2008). One of international education’s founders, the anthropologist [Edward T. Hall](#), conceptualized the terms “high context” and “low context” cultures, as well as the field of “proxemics” (the investigation of ideas of space and time across cultures). When reformers such as Hall helped build international education and intercultural communication in the 1940s and 1950s, the ideas were revolutionary; one philosopher prophesized that international education would change the very nature of global and human relations and lead to the “internationalization” of knowledge (Frankel 1969). That was in the 1960s.

International education draws its history and strength from at least five disciplines and knowledge orientations. These five frameworks are *anthropology*,

cross-cultural psychology and linguistics, historicism, critical sociology/global studies, and the learning sciences. If we combine these traditionally distinct frameworks, we arrive at the new mega discipline of international education. Each framework contributes something foundational so that the whole is larger than the sum of its parts:

- *Anthropology:* From anthropology, we start with the concepts of “emic” and “etic” (Mestenhauser 2011). Emic refers to the study of a culture in its internal, relative elements—in other words, the “insider view” of a culture on its own, unique terms. Etic, in contrast, refers to the study of a culture in its external, objective elements—the “outsider” or comparative view. These concepts are slightly dated in anthropology itself, but they are revolutionary within the study of international education and higher education. If we take the emic view, international education is the internal construction—the pedagogies, learning paradigms, languages, and symbolism—that makes up educational and societal systems. It includes the systems of thought—literature, languages, communications, linguistics, sociologies, and anthropologies—that structure how a culture or cultures think of themselves internally. If we simultaneously take the etic view, then international education includes the structures of globalization, universalism, and economic integration that barrel down on the emic. This “double consciousness” (to borrow a term from W.E.B. Du Bois) means that international education is properly a form of intersectionality that crosses the entire academy as well as all life and human activity. It is not just international students or global stuff. International education is simply: life in the twenty-first century.
- *Cross-Cultural Psychology and Linguistics:* From cross-cultural psychology and linguistics, we derive many of international education’s core concepts, including cultural dimensions, culture shock, cultural adaptation and intercultural development, individualism and collectivism, values and belief orientations, linguistic relativism, double consciousness (Du Bois 1903), and linguistic code-switching (Gardner-Chloros 2009). Cross-cultural psychology is itself a burgeoning field of research and theory, which aims to avoid the Western bias of much of the history of human psychology. In borrowing from cross-cultural psychology, we

avoid a lingering positivism (Appiah 2006)—or the assumption that knowledge is free from the values and deep contexts from which it derives. For example, students and many faculty continue to believe in the idea that science and math are universal, while the humanities are historical and cultural. These barriers between the “scientific” and the “cultural” are deeply engrained in modern psychology. They are now receiving some dramatic reframing and will require new theoretical and practical advances. Cross-cultural psychology, understood this way, privileges the emic over the etic. We are forced to revisit and recapture (and integrate into psychology) Geertz’s (1973) famous idea of “thick description”—the researcher’s or student’s interpretive observations of the contexts, meanings, and structures of a given culture or cultures under observation.

- *Historicism:* Similarly, educators often rely on a single narrative that we call “history.” Yet, the emic view requires that we think not of history, but of multiple, intercultural “histories.” This orientation to knowledge—traditionally called “historicism” in academic realms—is another revolutionary concept that is gradually seeping into academic and international education design. Take, for example, the study of the American Revolution. A historicist view would treat the American Revolution as a set of symbols and narratives that have guided unique U.S. approaches to knowledge and culture for generations. Science, progress, and notions of the “other” in U.S. life derive from this powerful event. International educators are beginning to integrate a historicist perspective into theory and practice. For example, the program “Appalachia to Cuba: Intercultural Approaches to Social Welfare and Education” at Warren Wilson College (a 2018 [GoAbroad Innovation Award winner](#)) uses both the emic and etic views as well as historicism to “[engage] students to compare and contrast interdependent social, environmental, political, economic, and cultural issues in Appalachia and Cuba, from both historical and contemporary perspectives.” As Kahn, Agnew, and Lilley (2017, 53) write, “Concepts such as global learning, globalization, and global citizenship are thus signified as specific historical and sociopolitical moments and may not be truly ‘global’ at all.” International educators are instead moving toward fine-grained, comparative, and intercultural historical analyses.

- *Critical Sociology/Global Studies*: Critical sociology, human geography, and global studies give international educators the crucial geographical and geospatial frameworks by which to understand the world (Kahn 2014; Kennedy 2015). Critical sociology and global studies help put a critical view of place back into international education. This is important because, for many decades, international educators were largely focused on intercultural communication and increasing mobility at the expense of deep knowledge of place. When I speak of critical sociology and geography, I also mean a re-orientation of mindsets, away from a Global North or Western framework to a more critically-aware, postcolonial framework. In the old mobility model, students and faculty visited a place perhaps only once, typically as outsiders. Today, and increasingly in the future, they are studying a particular place over several semesters and investigating the deep sociology and geopolitical pressures that impact a specific locale—especially in places most affected by poverty, globalization, and corruption.
- *Learning Sciences*: The exciting advance of the science and art of learning is the integral fifth framework of international education. How we learn is itself a misunderstood field of study with roots in the Progressive Education Movement of the early twentieth century. It is now a burgeoning movement, as evidenced by the worldwide growth of teaching and learning centers and the integration of learning outcomes and assessment into university systems. Although much work remains to be done, international educators and learning researchers are now joining forces. They are devising teaching and learning projects and centers, such as Purdue University's new [Center for Intercultural Learning, Mentorship, Assessment and Research](#). The next logical step is to engage faculty more broadly in campuswide and university-to-university collaborations. Moreover, the integration of big data offers an opportunity to assess the impacts of international education on faculty, students, host communities, and partners.

RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE TRENDS

International education is growing in the aforementioned areas, but the field could use more synthetic studies (studies that involve the consolidation of findings from multiple primary studies) that link these five areas together and explore how they interconnect. In addition, below are some key areas of need in the scholarship on international education.

The following research trends, gaps, and emerging ideas might shape the next 20 years of international education:

- *New Mega Disciplines*. Scholars and practitioners will likely see the creation of new paradigms and “disciplines” that cross several existing, traditional disciplines and divisions of knowledge. In addition to international education, these new paradigms may include post-humanism, machine learning, and “humanics.”
- *Experimental Studies and Basic Research*. While research in international higher education has exploded in recent years, there is still a need for more experimental studies and basic research that are not tied to immediate outcomes.
- *Historical and Textual Analysis*. With the exception of work by Contreras (2015), Gore (2005), Hoffa (2010), and a few others, the field lacks deep historical and rhetorical analyses of international education. Focus on critical internationalization studies and critical sociology can help balance the quantitative, more applied nature of the field's research aims and instruments.

With graduate programs in international higher education growing, new publications and journals being announced, and a large variety of leadership institutes and centers emerging, there is no shortage of activity in international higher education. The field is growing, not shrinking. Once fully blossomed, it will lead the way in transforming higher education.

As NAFSA Senior Fellow Jenny J. Lee noted in the [March 2019 issue](#) of *Trends and Insights* (p. 6), “Rather than retreating to old paradigms of one nation to another... we must reflect more openly about the paradigms through which international education is understood and operates.” Mobility as a paradigm was useful in eras when the primary need for the world was

more contact between people and ideas. Today, however, societies are suffering not from lack of contact, but from lack of meaning. By reframing international education as a new kind of discipline, involving frameworks drawn from multiple fields and perspectives, we as educators can create—through intelligent design—a more intelligent world.

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