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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The problem with international students' 'experiences' and the promise of their practices: Reanimating research about international students in higher education

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Abstract

The increasing number of people studying abroad has drawn significant scholarly attention to the experiences of international students. While these works have productively informed policy and practice regarding how international students may be better supported, they have not always considered the active ways international students contribute to higher education. This article suggests that adopting the notion of experience as a conceptual starting point is problematic because it only partially illuminates international students' agency and reproduces understandings of them as a vulnerable group. The more active notion of practice, by contrast, suggests a more agentive subject who is a pivotal actor in spaces of education. The main argument in this article is that the abiding focus on international students' experiences will be productively unsettled by orienting attention to their practices and theorising the notion of practice in more fluid and dynamic ways. After critically engaging with the existing literature, the article outlines four ways that a focus on international students' practices may reanimate debates. A focus

on practice will: (1) show how international students actively contribute to spaces of higher education, including classrooms, campuses and other sites of sociality; (2) demand that researchers theorise agency in more expansive ways and consider the practices of a broader set of social groups; (3) encourage researchers to make use of a wider set of qualitative research methods; and (4) create a stronger political foundation from which to defend the interests of international students in a post-COVID-19 world.

K E Y W O R D S
agency, practice, educational research, higher education, international student mobility, international students

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper critically engages with the value and implications of analysing the 'experiences' of international students in higher education. It suggests that the notion of experience only partially illuminates their agency and that a focus on international students' practices is needed to push debates in new directions.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

A focus on practice will:
- Show how international students contribute to higher education.
- Demand researchers theorise agency in more expansive ways and consider the agency of more diverse social groups.
- Encourage researchers to use a wider set of research methods.
- Create a stronger political foundation to defend international students' interests.

INTRODUCTION

The number of students studying abroad has increased significantly over the last few decades. Higher educational institutions in countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia—and more recently parts of Asia and the Middle East—have devised a range of strategies to recruit international students (Kearney & Lincoln, 2017; Wen & Hu, 2019). Alongside these efforts, institutions have sought to accommodate international students by developing support services and reworking processes related to teaching, learning and engagement (Ramachandran, 2011). The dynamic and contingent nature of these processes has raised questions about the implications of international student mobility for

higher education and the imperatives of international education (Hayes, 2019; Marginson, 2011; Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Rizvi, 2011). Amid an increasingly complex educational landscape, many scholars have sought to analyse these processes by investigating the experiences of international students (Andrade, 2006; Heng, 2017; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021).

The notion of experience has been deployed as a powerful and productive concept in various fields of educational research. In teaching theory and practice, for example, there has been a strong emphasis on harnessing students' experiences for enriching the learning process and generating knowledge (Dewey, 1986). In this usage, experience is often understood as a form of knowledge that all students have acquired prior to arriving in the classroom and that they can productively draw on within it. Similarly, in debates about experiential learning, experience is a primal component of learning itself, and educators place emphasis on knowledge and skills gained through seeing, doing and feeling different phenomena. Yet in some educational research, scholars do not always make explicit what they mean by the concept of experience. Its meanings and value are often taken for granted rather than being rigorously theorised and defined (Fox, 2008; O'Leary, 2010). The concept of experience has thus invited scrutiny. In higher education policy discourse in the United Kingdom, for example, Sabri (2011) notes how repeated reference to 'the student experience' homogenises students and neglects how their experiences are affected by factors such as class, race, gender and ethnicity. Jones (2017) argues that the notion of 'international student experience' blurs important similarities between domestic and international students and limits how services and supports for the student body are designed and implemented.

This article considers the value and implications of taking the notion of experience as a conceptual starting point for debates about international students in higher education. Within this field of research, foregrounding international students' experiences has often been used to assess the quality, impacts and possibilities of studying abroad (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Heng, 2017). Such research has been particularly fruitful for centring international students' voices and perspectives, rendering visible the struggles they endure and designing more suitable policy interventions and supports. Research which has revealed experiences of isolation among international students, for instance, has informed policy interventions which attempt to strengthen their social resources (Arthur, 2017). These kinds of contributions have been especially important for highlighting the struggles international students have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have also been fundamental for highlighting the diversity of international students themselves. But I want to suggest that as a means of foregrounding international students' practices, the notion of experience is only partially successful. Indeed, researchers have often conceptualised experience as a process that *happens to* international students rather than one that they more actively participate within. A critical engagement with the notion of experience therefore calls into question its value as a conceptual footing and suggests the need to use different analytical tools to illuminate the active ways international students contribute to higher education.

I then extend this argument by critically engaging with the ways that international students' practices have been analysed. While these debates have largely been concentrated in the field of international student mobility, I suggest that they offer useful starting points for moving beyond some of the shortcomings that a focus on students' experiences have tended toward. However, I argue that to enliven debates about international students, scholars need to attend to the more dynamic and contingent nature of practice and theorise its possibilities in more expansive ways (Clegg, 2011; Fox & Alldred, 2016; Hayes, 2019). The third substantive section discusses some of the key features of theories of practice and offers four provisional suggestions as to how they might reanimate debates about international students. The conclusion briefly summarises the main argument and makes a case for the pressing need to reanimate debates at this historical juncture.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Qualitative work regarding international students began to emerge largely in the early 2000s as rates of student mobility across the globe increased significantly. A focus on the experiences of students was one of the features that distinguished this body of work from the quantitative forms of research that preceded it (Montgomery, 2010). A turn towards the experiences of international students was motivated by a commitment to conceptualise international students as agents of international education, rather than as its objects (Holloway et al., 2010). An emergent set of studies were marked by their recognition that international students were in a unique position to comment on the quality and impacts of studying abroad, and thus had insights that needed to be elicited and understood (Andrade, 2006; Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Cownie & Addison, 1996). One of the overarching contributions of this strand of research was to illuminate a disjuncture between the stated aims of international education and the experiences of international students (Guo & Guo, 2017; Page & Chahboun, 2019). Where governments and higher education institutions emphasised the potential of international student mobility for fostering knowledge about different cultures and strengthening bilateral relations, this research pointed towards processes which stifled these aims.

Important studies demonstrated how international students struggled to meet learning demands in classrooms, had difficulty making friends and forging social connections on campus, and documented experiences of racism and discrimination (Sawir et al., 2008; Sherry et al., 2010; Tarry, 2011). Recent research has demonstrated that many of these problems persist for international students. Arkoudis et al. (2019), for example, argue that international students' experiences in Australia are often characterised by a lack of social integration with domestic students and a limited sense of belongingness. Corresponding research has shown how similar issues punctuate classroom dynamics. Studies have demonstrated that some educators are ill-equipped to attend to the needs of a culturally and linguistically diverse student body, and have illuminated processes of institutional stereotyping (Biggs, 1999; Valdez, 2015). Heng (2017), for example, shows how Chinese students in the United States often feel that educators share anecdotes which are difficult to understand without having grown up in the United States, and want more encouragement from educators to help them share their viewpoints in the classroom.

This set of literature has had several positive impacts on research and practice regarding international students. In the first instance, it has been especially valuable for informing how policymakers and other stakeholders might better meet the needs of international students. For example, contributions have given potent advice for how educators can teach international students more effectively, such as fostering multicultural group work activities which explicitly call on students to explore each other's cultural identities (Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Leask, 2009). Conceptually, this scholarship has been effective for displacing deficit models as the dominant mode thinking about international students (Heng, 2017, 2019; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). Studies which came from a deficit perspective focused on what international students ostensibly lacked and made recommendations as to how they needed to change in order to have a productive time abroad. But by foregrounding international students' perspectives, this body of literature illuminated the shortcomings of higher education institutions themselves, such as inadequate teacher training and professional development opportunities, and how axes of power affected international students' experiences (Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Heng, 2017, 2019).

Yet while this set of literature has been useful for illuminating the voices and diversity of international students, the notion of experience itself is not often theorised. This has led to some conceptual shortcomings, such as a reluctance to adequately consider when one experience begins and another experience ends (Fox, 2008). For example, much research

has examined international students' experience of discrimination or cultural insensitivity in the classroom (Valdez, 2015). But this approach often takes for granted that classrooms are ready-made: an international student 'arrives' in a classroom and the analytical focus is on what happens afterwards (Holton & Riley, 2013; Raghuram, 2012). While offering important insights, such research rarely accounts for how international students respond to those experiences (Lee et al., 2017), how their doing so influences teaching practices, or indeed how educators reformulate teaching practices of their own accord (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007, 2010; Tran & Vu, 2018). In other words, a focus on experience often tends towards eliciting a snapshot of international students' encounters in a classroom at a moment *in time*, rather than describing how international students actively shape those encounters and spaces *over time*.

Debates about the experiences of international students have also recently been critiqued for their tendency to narrow the aims of international education more broadly. As Page and Chahboun (2019) argue, a significant number of studies are founded on the assumption that intercultural cooperation is the primary purpose of international students' educational sojourns. This has been the assumption underpinning educational research which encourages students to adapt or acculturate to dominant cultures in their host countries (Andrade, 2006). This focus has directed attention away from the social connections international students have been able to forge. Even when researchers pay attention to interactions among a co-national group, they are often cast as a deficit, or as insulation for an apparent 'culture shock', rather than as being dynamic and productive in their own right (Heng, 2018; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Taha & Cox, 2016).

Perhaps one of the main limitations of this literature is that the notion of experience itself is often conceived of as a relatively passive process. Indeed, researchers have predominately conceptualised experience as a process that *happens to* international students rather than one that they more actively participate within (Madge et al., 2014). Notwithstanding important exceptions (Green, 2007; Peters et al., 2020; Trahar, 2009), the use of a passive conceptual approach at least partially explains why many analyses have focused on *what does not happen* rather than what does. Prominent themes include limited interaction with domestic students, struggles developing a sense of connectedness in their host countries and effective teaching strategies in classrooms (Arkoudis et al., 2013). The value of the notion of experience in this field of research is therefore fraught. While it has productively showcased the challenges international students face, it has often downplayed their contributions to higher education. Research of this nature can reproduce a discourse of dependency around international students (Fakunle, 2021, p. 674; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021, p. 11). In contrast to this approach, this article contends that foregrounding international students' practices can potentially open up avenues for further research which have not been fully probed. Developing this argument demands a critical engagement with the ways that international students' practices have been discussed in scholarly debates so far.

CURRENT APPROACHES TO ANALYSING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The notion of practice has received much less attention than the notion of experience in debates about international students in educational research. It is telling that the term 'practice' commonly appears in literature searches about international students in connection with terms such as 'teaching practice' or 'best practice'. The emphasis within such studies is often upon how international students might be better supported in institutional settings. While important work, it reveals a tendency among some bodies of research to assume that the capacity to shape and guide educational processes is the preserve of

official university functionaries. In part, this is as it should be: educators and other staff do have a responsibility to constantly revise and improve their practices to achieve better learning outcomes for the entire student body. But the relative absence of terms like 'international students' practices' speaks to the reluctance among some researchers to fully consider international students as agentive subjects within and beyond the classroom.

Notwithstanding this caveat, scholars have made considerable efforts to foreground the practices of international students, especially since the late 2000s (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Brooks et al., 2012; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Waters, 2005). In educational research, important studies have highlighted how international students grapple with new learning environments and how they manage the challenges associated with living abroad (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007, 2010; Baas, 2014). These studies are effective for showing the diversity of the international students, the various factors which affect their learning and the ways they navigate challenging environments. They have also encouraged policymakers and practitioners to rethink interventions as a process through which they harness the capacities of students, rather than attempt to fill a deficit (Arthur, 2017).

Attending to the practices of international students has been an especially strong feature in studies of international student mobility (Brooks et al., 2012; Findlay et al., 2012; Xu, 2017). Instead of thinking strictly about the experiences of students when they arrive at a given destination, some studies showed how interactions among prospective students' social networks were pivotal for shaping mobilities in the first place (Beech, 2015; Taha & Cox, 2016). In this instance, a focus on practice complicates the assumption that the experience of higher education commences when a student arrives overseas. A related set of studies have emphasised how the discursive production of geographical hierarchies meant that prospective students were more inclined to attend institutions in 'advanced' countries and how this affected their practices when they travelled abroad for study (Cheng, 2014; Marginson, 2011). Cheng's (2014) ethnographic study of East Asian students who attend an elite university in Singapore, for instance, unpacks the everyday ways that international students seek to position themselves as more 'modern' than others who have not studied outside of their home countries. But international students' attempts to realise advantage in this way are not always successful. Xu (2017) shows how a disjuncture can emerge between international students' habitus, expectation and credentials and their capacity to acquire capital when they graduate and move across settings. Within this set of studies, higher educational institutions do not exist *a priori*, but are constantly reproduced and changed by student mobilities (Holloway et al., 2010; Holton & Riley, 2013, p. 62).

One of the main contributions of this research has been to shift debates about international students beyond the immediacy of classrooms and campuses by positioning students' practices within broader processes of globalisation (Rizvi, 2011). Foregrounding the practices of international students has enabled scholars to illuminate how they often seek symbolic membership in an elite transnational space marked by a cosmopolitan outlook (Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2005). By thinking about student mobility as a transnational phenomenon, this scholarship also troubled a tendency to delineate educational sojourns as an individual process or singular movement between two points. Instead, it underscored the importance of conceptualising students' practices as operating within—and indeed creating—transnational spaces and networks that are fluid, dynamic and mobile (Finn, 2017; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). This has been an especially apparent theme in studies that highlight international students' everyday use of digital technologies and social media platforms (Martin & Rizvi, 2014). Studies which analyse the digital connectivity of international students have also unsettled the earlier argument that they lose their social connections when they move abroad, and offer a counterpoint to studies which conceptualise international students as isolated and disconnected.

Another important contribution of this body of work was to offer a more critical understanding of power relations and international students' place within them. Where some debates tended to position international students as a vulnerable group, this set of studies showed how upwardly mobile international students were sometimes able to consolidate their advantage. This literature thereby challenged dominant understandings of international education which emphasise its capacity for ameliorating inequalities, by showing how it served to entrench and create new social divides (Waters, 2012). These insights were enabled by prioritising a focus on the class background of international students, and especially how they sought to consolidate and extend their stocks of social, cultural and economic capital through practices of educational mobility (Brooks et al., 2012; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015).

But a prominent critique of this literature is that it theorises an overly rational subject, intent on securing economic gain (Yang, 2018). There are relatively few studies which highlight the more positive and productive aspects of students' practices, such as how they support each other in new social and learning environments (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). Agency in this scholarship, then, is mainly treated as a process through which actors seek to realise instrumental ends (Fakunle, 2021; Lo, 2019; Yang, 2018). This analytical focus shuts down scope for thinking about the more contingent nature of social practice, as well as thinking about how international students might build and sustain social relations marked by reciprocity, mutuality and generosity. From a political standpoint, the implications of this framing are potentially adverse, given how it locates international students as a privileged group interested primarily in their own gain (Robertson, 2013; Waters, 2018).

Debates which foreground the practices of international students have also had surprisingly little to say about the practices of more marginalised international students (Waters, 2012; Yang, 2018). This is also arguably related to the use of an implicit schema which casts dominant social groups as significantly more dynamic and agentive than those who are dominated. Yet, it is widely recognised that international student mobility is no longer the preserve of the upper echelons of society, but is increasingly sought by students from broader social classes and geographical areas (Tran & Nyland, 2013; Xu, 2017). Scholarly debates have not adequately attended to the changing nature of the international student body and the practices of international students who may not be classified as elite. Therefore, while these debates have challenged some of the limitations of focusing strictly on international students' experiences, they have given rise to another set of analytical issues that a more expansive focus on practice might move beyond.

CENTRING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PRACTICES: NEW AVENUES FOR RESEARCH

This section sketches four ways that research on international students' practices may extend existing debates. It is provisional and not exhaustive. It is intended to generate scholarly discussions that may lead to greater understandings of international students' practices and their contributions to higher education. In order to do so, it is necessary to offer a brief discussion of the key features of theories of practice to underpin my claims.

In the broadest sense, 'practices' can be defined as arrays of embodied human activity which are materially mediated and organised around shared practical understanding (Schatzki, 2001, p. 11). While there is much debate among practice theorists, they are bound by their belief that human activity, knowledge, language, power, meaning and social institutions cannot be understood as abstract phenomena, but need to be analysed as fields of practice (Giddens, 1978; Schatzki, 2016). Institutions such as universities, for example, do not exist prior to human action, but are constituted through it; they are social phenomena that

unfold through the day-to-day happening of practices and activities (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). Practice theories therefore orient attention towards the significance and latent meaning of everyday life; they challenge individualistic ways of theorising the social world, at the same time as they refrain from theorising social action as *determined* by broader structures (Shove et al., 2007). This distinguishes theories of practice from ways of theorising human action which emphasise the qualities of individuals, the capacity for rational decision-making or the character of external structures. Instead, theories of practice aver that certain ways of being in the world are established and maintained through tacit forms of knowledge and understanding generated through social practice (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1990).

Scholars have productively drawn on theories of practice to advance various strands of educational research (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Green et al., 2013; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). An especially notable contribution is that of Lave and Wenger (1991) and their concept of communities of practice, which developed new insights into learning by understanding it as a *situated activity*. Other scholars have drawn on—and developed—theories of practice to generate new insights about school leadership (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015), the reproduction of inequality through schooling processes (Bourdieu, 1990) and how changing access to formal schooling has precipitated new forms of inequality in diverse settings (Levinson & Holland, 1996). These theories of practice share a conceptual starting point that human beings are agentive and interdependent subjects whose actions make the world (Ingold, 2011). It is this conceptual starting point which distinguishes the notion of practice from the more passive notion of experience, which has permeated the existing literature. I now want to sketch four ways in which orienting more attention to international students' practices will push debates in new directions.

Firstly, *foregrounding the practices of international students will draw greater attention to the ways that they contribute to spaces of higher education*, *including classrooms*, *campuses and other sites of sociality and exchange*. A focus on social practice does not assume that these spaces are ready-made or that people situated within them have differential capacities determined by their country of origin. It demands that researchers theorise the dynamics of intercultural exchange without implying that international students need to integrate with dominant cultures to have a positive and productive time in higher education (Hayes, 2017; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Page & Chahboun, 2019). It therefore moves beyond an abiding focus in educational research that assesses their strategies for acculturation, adaptation or integration. Instead, a focus on practice asks more simply, what do international students do within these spaces and how do international students shape them? *The focus is on what does happen*, *rather than what does not*.

Strong antecedents for educational research of this kind lie in works that underscore the creativity and diversity of international students and how they contend the hardships they face (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Heng, 2019; Ploner, 2017; Tran & Vu, 2018). In these studies, the emphasis is centred on how international students actively shape teaching and learning processes in the classroom (Green, 2007), how they participate in and forge interventions which operate within and beyond campus (Montgomery, 2010; Ploner, 2017) and how international students contextualise intercultural relations in time and space through social practice (Marginson, 2011). Further research which extends these lines of inquiry will help illuminate the active ways that international students contribute to higher education and inform policy interventions that harness their capacities. Focusing on the active contributions of international students will also help displace a discourse of dependency around international students, which positions them as a vulnerable group in need of intervention (Hayes, 2019). And unpacking students' practices and the logics which underpin them will foster a more critical understanding of student mobilities and challenge the dominant framing, which prioritises students' economic ambitions (Fakunle, 2021; Ploner, 2017).

Secondly, *scholars conducting educational research about international students need to articulate more expansive forms of practice and consider the practices of a broader set of social groups*. Such research might take cues from theoretical developments within the social sciences that have reconsidered the concept of agency and the ways in which social action is shaped (Fox & Alldred, 2016; Ingold, 2011). It might also consider broader conceptual frameworks, such as the capabilities approach, for thinking about international students' motivations and aims (Lo, 2019). As Fakunle (2021) argues, the capabilities approach is able to draw attention to the educational, experiential, aspirational *and* economic factors which motivate international students, which is critical for reimaging policy that more effectively caters to them.

Tran and Vu (2018) have recently argued that attending to diverse modalities of international students' practices will enable scholars to illuminate how they productively transform their present and future and the communities which they inhabit. This argument pairs with Montgomery's (2010) analysis, which suggests that bonds among international students form a community of practice which is indispensable for supporting each other. This work could be extended by linking it with the burgeoning scholarly interest in care and feminist contributions that illuminate the value of unpaid activities (Barker, 2019; Madge et al., 2009; Raghuram, 2012). Greater attention to the significance of care in educational settings, for example, will illuminate everyday acts of solidarity and mutuality among the international student body. Not only would such work help promote the public value of care, it might also provide insights into how practitioners working in educational settings could nurture and sustain such practices to enhance international students' well-being (Arthur, 2017).

Educational research could also enter a productive dialogue with studies in geography and cognate disciplines to better attend to the practices of marginalised social groups. Ethnographic works detailing the dynamics of student mobility in the Global South, for example, have highlighted the practices that students from minority ethnic groups deploy to contend racism and discrimination. Traces of students' attempts to adapt to dominant cultures can be identified in these works. But it is coupled with a more concerted effort to illuminate the ways they collectively organise resistance, as well as how they develop every-day, nuanced ways of realising social gain (Deuchar, 2019; Smith & Gergan, 2015; Waters, 2018). But future research must not assume that international students' practices lead to cross-cultural learning, or that international students' contributions are necessarily progressive. A focus on practice might reveal tensions within the international student body, which is at present an understudied theme within educational research (Jones, 2013; Rutten & Verstappen, 2014). Teasing out these tensions, along with similarities and differences, among the student body is especially important given the increasing number of students studying abroad from a broader set of classes and more diverse set of geographical regions.

These first two points can be drawn together to make a third, specifically as it relates to their methodological implications. *Educational research about international students' practice will benefit from scholars' use of a more diverse set of qualitative research methods*. Over the last few decades, qualitative methods have yielded strong insights that have advanced understandings of international students in higher education (Trahar, 2009). But data gathered through surveys, questionnaires and interviews have predominated debates and overshadowed works that have more ethnographic components (Cheng, 2014; Yang, 2018). Indeed, participant observation as a mode of gathering and producing data remains marginal in educational research about international students in Anglophone countries. Similarly, methodologies such as narrative inquiry and autoethnography are able to draw out participants' knowledge in ways that challenge dominant modes of generating knowledge, and which challenge dominant understandings of teaching and learning (Peters et al., 2020; Trahar, 2009). Scholars may productively draw on these methods to unpack international students' practices and the ways that they make sense of them, and foster critical insights

into the power dynamics which punctuate educational institutions (Kemmis, 2006; Peters et al., 2020).

There is much greater scope in this connection to conduct educational research *with* international students (Green, 2007; Welikala & Atkin, 2014). There are several implications of this observation. Firstly, where possible and appropriate, scholars could incorporate participatory research methods into educational research and invite international students to shape the problematics investigated. This would deepen attempts to include students' perspectives by promoting their participation in—and empowerment through—the research process (Seale, 2013). It would also work to alter the power dynamics between researchers and participants, and to rework how the concepts used to understand their practices are informed and developed (Trahar, 2009). Secondly, scholars could take cues from studies which gather material by 'walking with' participants and accompanying them through the seemingly mundane activities that comprise day-to-day life (Fox & Alldred, 2016). Such methods necessarily orient attention towards practice, the ways that participants relate to place and how they actively navigate and shape the world (Evans & Jones, 2011). The use of these methods could be especially informative for advancing understandings of international students' connectedness and belonging in their host countries. Thirdly, researchers might also move across borders with participants in multi-sited ethnographies to yield insights into the spatially and temporally contingent nature of social practice. Among other advances, this will illuminate the potential and pressures that international students encounter as they move between destinations, how they respond to and shape those possibilities and pressures, and how axes of social difference change or are affected by movement between settings (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Hao et al., 2016; Rutten & Verstappen, 2014). Drawn together, a focus on conducting research with international students through these qualitative methods may yield insights that educational research is yet to fully anticipate.

Finally, *attending to international students' practices will provide a stronger political basis from which to defend their interests in a post-COVID-19 world*. A prominent critique of universities amid the COVID-19 pandemic is that they have become overly reliant on international students to meet funding shortfalls. This argument has been mobilised to cast blame onto university administrators as being responsible for their own predicament. In an immediate sense, this argument distracts attention from policy decisions made by various governments, which necessitated universities finding additional sources of funding in the first place. But it also implies that international students' contributions to higher education are primarily economic. This focus downplays the diverse ways that they contribute to universities. Perhaps inadvertently, educational research which centres on international students' experiences has sometimes fed into conservative political bases that define international students as a liability (Koehne, 2006; Robertson, 2011). If it is true that international students are in need of resources or in need of intervention, then their claims are less likely to gain traction relative to other social groups in times of austerity and hardship (Devos, 2003). On the other hand, if international students are conceptualised as a privileged social group intent on advancing their wealth, then there is little incentive to cater to them from a social justice perspective. In both cases, governments of different political leanings will likely win favour among their support base by ensuring that international students are proverbially 'at the back of the queue'.

Politically, then, attending to international students' practices is important because it creates a terrain where their contributions are foregrounded, where their skills are rendered visible and where their motivations are more thoroughly unpacked. Focusing on their practices orients attention to the ways they contribute to academic life and academic institutions, and how their contributions spill out to other spheres, such as the home, the workplace and other sites of sociality and exchange. Unpacking the ways that international students conduct themselves within these spaces creates a stronger political foundation from which to defend their interests. Because when analytical focus is centred on their practices, international students are

conceptualised as an agentive and diverse set of actors who make a vital contribution to society. It follows that the recovery of universities and national economies post-COVID-19 will be enhanced by international students and initiatives that harness their capacities (Hurley, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This article has questioned the value and implications of taking the notion of experience as a conceptual starting point for debates about international students in higher education. It offers a critical engagement with debates about international students' experiences, as well as with how the notion of practice has been conceptualised thus far. The main argument is that a focus on international students' experiences will be productively unsettled by orienting greater attention to their practices, and theorising the notion of practice in more diverse ways.

By making this argument, this article pairs with recent calls among scholars to reanimate debates about international students in higher education (Guo & Guo, 2017; Heng, 2017; Lo, 2019; Page & Chahboun, 2019; Yang, 2020). A common thread throughout these studies is a call to pay greater attention to the perspectives of international students. This article has built on this work by calling for the need to attend to their practices. The previous section suggested that a focus on international students' practices will: (1) show how they actively contribute to spaces of higher education, including classrooms, campuses and other sites of sociality; (2) demand that researchers theorise practice in more expansive ways and consider the practices of a broader set of social groups; (3) encourage researchers to make use of a wider set of qualitative research methods; and (4) create a stronger political foundation from which to defend the interests of international students in a post-COVID-19 world.

There is a pressing need to reanimate debates about international students at this historical juncture (Fakunle, 2021). Over the last few decades, educational research has drawn into stark relief the shortcomings of international education and the limits of institutions organised around market rationalities (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Waters, 2012). This demands a rethinking of the values underpinning international education and greater attention to how they are realised (or not) in practice. In these circumstances, attending to the practices of international students will mark a shift in how the possibilities of international education are imagined and conceptualised. It will register a moment when the aims of international education are learned from—rather than *defined for*—international students. This will be advanced by scholarly attention to how international education is practiced by international students, the ethical stances and values that their practices reveal and articulate, and greater attention to the strengths and resilience of the international student body.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT
Approval from an ethics committee was not applicable to this article as it did not include conducting research with participants.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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