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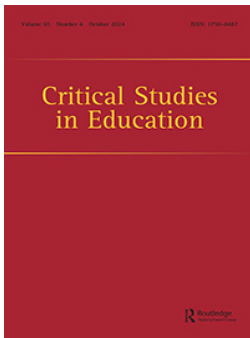
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Enacted spaces of peer learning: tracing practices of relationality among international students in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This article attends to practices of peer learning among international students on and around an Australian university campus. Informed by posthuman theories, we frame peer learning as a relational process that is entangled with objects, bodies, technologies, spaces and materialities. Our analysis pays attention to the vitality of various spaces and the pedagogic practices they call forth. In doing so, it differs from educational theorising that treats space as a passive backdrop to learning, as well as that which focuses strictly on formal spaces of education, such as the classroom. Our focus on affirmative practices among international students also differs from deficit approaches which suggests international students need to interact with domestic students to fit in to 'host' cultures abroad. Drawing on interview material generated in 2021, we show how enacted spaces of peer learning are formed as international students seek and settle into accommodation, as well through their everyday practices on and around campus. The main argument is that enacted spaces of peer learning generate critical knowledge and relationships among international students that make studying abroad productive and meaningful. Harnessing and nurturing such practices will be vital for creating a more inclusive and caring educational landscape.

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, the number of students travelling to Anglophone countries for higher education has increased significantly. In the Australian context, there were over 400,000 international students in higher education in 2019, with the majority coming from China, India, and other countries across the Asian region (Austrade, 2022). These processes are thoroughly entangled with attempts by universities to internationalize their offerings. This has included developing pedagogic practices that are more effective for a diverse cohort, embedding international perspectives in curriculum, and efforts to coordinate inclusive social and cultural activities on campuses (Daniels, 2013). While many scholars have pointed to the hardships

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international students face in spite of these initiatives (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020; Sherry et al., 2010), less is known about international students' generative capacities and the vast array of learning practices that constitute higher education (Deuchar, 2022; Heng, 2018). This article attends to the ways international students partake in enacting spaces of peer learning on and around an Australian university campus. The main argument is that enacted spaces of peer learning generate critical knowledge and relationships that help make studying abroad productive and meaningful for international students.

We develop this argument by building on recent works that have explored the potential of posthuman theories for enlivening educational research (Gourlay, 2021; Gravett et al., 2021; Deuchar, 2023a). In contrast to approaches which frame learning as an individual, cognitive, and singularly human endeavour, posthumanism frames learning as a relational process that is entangled with a diverse array of objects, bodies, technologies, spaces and materialities (Fenwick, 2012). Thinking about learning in this way orients attention to mutual interdependencies among an array of actors and how these are constitutive of pedagogic and learning practices. In this article, we pay particular attention to the spatial dynamics of peer learning among international students. We trace how spaces of learning are formed as international students seek and settle into accommodation, as well through their everyday practices on and around campus. In a departure from much educational research related to international students, this article does not privilege classrooms or lecture theatres as the primary sites of learning (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021). Nor do we consider the knowledge valued within those spaces as more important or separable from knowledge developed elsewhere. Instead, we focus on how enacted spaces of peer learning are practiced, how they are interconnected, and how these spaces are productive of vital knowledges and relationships.

We substantiate these contributions by drawing on interview material generated with international students who were enrolled in master's degrees and studying in-country at an Australian university. All participants came from parts of Asia, including South Asia, Southeast Asia and China. Interviews were conducted via Zoom in 2022, as most Australian universities were teaching online and in-person but when the most acute effects of COVID-19 had passed. Informed by a critical engagement with postqualitative inquiry (Gerrard et al., 2017; St. Pierre, 2017), the empirical sections trace practices of relationality among participants, focusing on how they learned from one another, shared information about settling into Australia, and how they helped each other navigate the demands of their degrees. Our focus on affirmative relationships among international students distinguishes our study from influential research which suggests they need to 'fit in' or acculturate to their 'host' countries to have a productive time abroad (Andrade, 2006). It also offers a counterpoint to a related body of work which locates interaction with domestic students as the key to – and marker of – a fulfilling transnational experience (Arkoudis & Baik, 2014). Linking research about the generative potential of international student peer groups with posthuman theories (Baloo et al., 2021; Fenwick & Landri, 2012; Jayadeva, 2020; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009), this article considers informal spatial practices that might prefigure more inclusive and caring educational futures. Our focus on reciprocity and mutuality among international students can be read as an acknowledgement of their capacity to bring those futures about.

The remainder of this article is divided in four main sections. The following section outlines how a posthuman understanding of relationality extends dominant understandings of learning and knowledge production. To date, educational research regarding international students has yet to thoroughly engage with posthuman theories, and so we draw liberally across them to highlight some of their affordances. While acknowledging diversity among posthuman theories and their material orientations, in this article we focus especially on how materiality and space partake in the dynamics of peer learning. The subsequent section introduces the method and setting of the research, including a discussion about the implications of a posthuman ontology for working with qualitative methods which have traditionally been anthropocentric (Brinkman, 2015). This is followed by the empirical material which is presented in three sections. The first section traces the ways enacted spaces of peer learning were assembled as participants sought and settled into accommodation, while the second explores how learning practices and peer groups were assembled on and around campus. The third section briefly discusses how enacted spaces of peer learning were meaningful and productive for international students but also discusses instances in which they were not. The final section draws together the main arguments and locates their significance as part of an ‘anti-deficit’ turn in research with international students before sketching avenues for further inquiry (Mittelmeier et al., 2023; Oyinloye & Zhang, 2023; Reed, 2023).

Situating peer learning among international students: relationality, materiality and space

To speak about the significance of peer learning suggests a general stance on the nature of learning and the production of knowledge. In the most immediate sense, the term ‘peer’ elides the individual student and suggests a relation between two or more of them. In doing so it coheres with a relational ontology which locates humans not as autonomous and individual actors, but as mutually interdependent beings (Hickey & Riddle, 2022; Lynch, 2006). The term ‘peer’ also muddles a foundational distinction in educational theory – that between teacher and student – by situating peers as co-learners and refusing to suggest that knowledge is ‘transmitted’ in a particular direction among them (Biesta, 2006; Bright, 2020; Ingold, 2018). A focus on the peer group thus invokes educational theories that understand teaching and learning as relational processes. From this perspective, learning occurs in practice as actors come together to produce knowledge (Aspelin, 2014; Gravett et al., 2020; Ljungblad, 2021). Educational theorists writing from this standpoint typically emphasise the importance of mutuality and trust for fostering students’ intellectual growth and wellbeing (V. Anderson et al., 2020; Barnacle & Dall’alba, 2017). Yet these relationships should not be viewed simply as a foundation from which learning occurs and from which knowledge is then acquired. Instead, relational pedagogies emphasise how learning occurs – and knowledge is produced – through the enactment and entanglement of those relationships (Biesta, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Noddings, 2005).

Such relational understandings of education have inspired much thinking about the dynamics of learning among peers (Gee, 2004; Havnes, 2008; Hickey & Riddle, 2022), with some works attending to these dynamics among international students specifically (Deuchar, 2024; Jayadeva, 2020; Montgomery, 2020; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009).

Pertinent themes across this literature include the inclusivity of the peer group, the importance of close bonds and affective ties, the capacity to develop and connect forms of knowledge beyond the curriculum, and the capacity to share practical information about living abroad in effective ways. Montgomery and McDowell's (2009) study in the United Kingdom, for instance, challenged depictions of international students as isolated and passive, by showing how they learned and lived together such that they could have a fulfilling time abroad. Foregrounding Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of 'communities of practice', Montgomery and McDowell (2009) showed how international students actively develop vital supports and knowledges within a purposeful learning community. In a similar vein, Jayadeva's (2020) recent work shows how Indian students who wish to study in Germany use social media platforms to develop 'online mutual-help communities' to help them navigate the process of studying elsewhere. In attending to the dynamic and creative capacities of international students, much of this work has productively unsettled deficit approaches which have endured in much of the literature (Deuchar, 2023b).

Yet the theoretical underpinnings of some of these works have been critiqued for centring human relations and downplaying the broader entanglements of which these relationships are a part (Bozalek et al., 2018; Fenwick & Landri, 2012). In educational research, this has meant that there has been limited attention to the ways educational practices – including those among the peer group – are constituted through a vast assemblage of objects, bodies, technologies, materialities, spaces and environments (Fenwick et al., 2011; Healy & Mulcahy, 2021; Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2023). In questioning the notion of human exceptionalism, posthuman theories locate humans as continuous with the material world (Barad, 2007; Fenwick, 2012; Gourlay, 2021). Rather than seeing humans as observers who are somehow separate from the world, all entities are considered intertwined and constituted through relations (Bayne, 2018). While acknowledging differences among posthuman theories (Fenwick & Landri, 2012), posthuman theorists do not attribute agency strictly to human actors but consider how agency emerges through webs of relations between materialities. Thus if humanist relational pedagogies *decentre individuals* in favour of relations between humans, posthuman theorists *decentre humans* in favour of thinking about relations among human *and* non-human actors (Deuchar and Gorur, 2023; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). This enables educational theorists to consider how a multitude of actors partake in educational processes, and to attend to how objects, bodies and spaces constitute practices of relationality and engagement (Gravett et al., 2021; Healy, 2016).

One of the pertinent ways posthumanism creates scope for enlivening educational research is by considering how objects and spaces partake in pedagogic practices (Mulcahy et al., 2015). Here, spaces (including digital spaces) are understood as continual constructions which are composed through flows of people, social practices and interactions of materialities (Healy, 2016; Massey, 2005; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Thinking about space as an ongoing enactment differs from casting it as a fixed physical environment that shapes or constrains social practice in a dialogic sense, for this rests on an ontology of separateness. Instead, the relational ontology of posthumanism frames space and human and nonhuman actors as mutually constitutive and emergent (Mulcahy et al., 2015). If a group of peers meets in a classroom to discuss an assignment, for example, they might organise the desks and chairs in a way such that they are able to face one

another. Doing so may be more conducive to dialogue and collaboration than if all desks were facing the lectern. In this example, a posthuman analysis would not attribute agency strictly to human actors (the students) or to non-human actors (desks and chairs) but would trace how possibilities of pedagogic practice emerge through configurations between them (Taylor, 2018). The desks and chairs are seen to play a vital role in calling forth certain practices, and it is in this sense in which objects ‘act’ and partake in the momentary instantiation of space.

In thinking with the affordances of various posthuman theories, this article attends to some of the ways international students enact spaces of peer learning in higher education. Our work connects with research that troubles binaries such as inside/outside the classroom and that emphasises instead how multiple spaces of education are interconnected (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Hopkins, 2011). Especially pertinent are studies concerning how student accommodation facilitates, dormitories and various spaces on and around campus become important for student wellbeing and belonging (Balloo et al., 2021; Garvey et al., 2018; Glass, 2018). Ahn and Davis’s (2020) study of student belonging, for example, highlights how students’ personal living spaces and broader surrounds are key sites of affective, interpersonal and emotional attachment (see also Devezy et al., 2023; Finn & Holton, 2019). Our analysis builds on this work by tracing the ways enacted spaces of peer learning foster affective attachments, relationships and knowledges that are vital for international students but also by attending to instances in which they do not. It is precisely because we theorise spaces as interconnected, shifting and contingent that we do not attempt to demarcate or name those spaces. Our analytical focus is thus on *how spaces come into being* rather than *what those spaces are*. The phrase ‘enacted spaces of peer learning’ is a deliberately passive construction intended not to single out human actors in this process and one that gestures toward the generative capacities of space.

The research

This research was an exploratory project designed to investigate the ways international students support each other while living and learning in Australia. We investigated this theme in relation to participants’ arrival in Australia, their social activity and engagement, and their practices and experiences in classrooms. International students from countries across various parts of Asia were chosen as they make up the largest cohort of international students in Australia. The research team used existing networks, convenience sampling and snowball sampling to recruit participants, this included sharing information about the study with colleagues, through social media and with flyers on campus itself. All participants were international master’s students at a prestigious university in Melbourne. The sample consisted of ten men and nine women, including nine students from China, five from Vietnam, three from India and two from Indonesia. In the presentation of the empirical material, we have taken care to ensure we include the voices of men and women, as well as at least one participant from each national background. This enables us to represent the diversity of the students and to show how the themes we explore are shared among them. Because we did not consider there to be a single vantage point from which to reflect on these themes, we sought participants who had been in Australia for varying lengths of time. Some had been in Australia prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, while others had arrived as recently as three weeks

prior to the interview. A total of 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom over a three-month period, with interviews usually lasting between 45 minutes and one hour. Ethics approval to conduct the research was granted by the University of Melbourne's ethics committee, project identification number 22627. In line with these requirements, all informants gave informed consent before participating and pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Our analysis of the interview transcripts made use of conventional qualitative methods but also revealed the limits of their anthropocentrism (Brinkman, 2015). For as St. Pierre (2017) explains, conventional qualitative methods are anchored in a humanist framing wherein language is taken as the most legitimate form of evidence and representation of truth. This ontological privileging of human cognition and intentionality looks for meaning in the spoken word, and often involves a predetermined methodological script where discrete stages of analysis follow sequentially from one to the next (Mazzei, 2021; Springgay & Truman, 2018). But in privileging dialogue, voice, and narrative this form of inquiry tends to place material, spatial and affective intensities outside the register of meaning (Taylor, 2018). In our analysis, the researchers each familiarised themselves with the interview transcripts and then met to discuss themes across participants' responses. Much of the interview material attested to the potent ways international students assisted each other as they arrived in the country and commenced their degrees. Yet it was striking how particular spaces 'haunted' these discussions. Importantly, however, the significance of these spaces and their nonhuman agencies was not always surfaced by the human participants. Here, it became apparent that spaces were bound up with international students' peer learning practices and that agency was not a property of individual bodies but emerged through material configurations (Taylor, 2018).

Drawing out the significance of these nonhuman agencies through our analysis thus meant appreciating that 'meaning almost always escapes the capture, the closure, of language' (St. Pierre, 2017, p. 39). Our method thus registered a posthuman ontology that situates 'participants' responses' *with* the broader entanglements of which they are a part (Jackson, 2017); one that attends to the affective intensities that the material world issues forth (Healy & Mulcahy, 2021). Our analysis can thus be seen as an emergent and dynamic process that did not ignore 'minor events' on the grounds that they are unreliable or invalid, but which made room for them, tracing their indeterminacy and multiplicity without downplaying their meaning and significance (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986). The sequentially ordered script of qualitative analysis and its claims to certitude were abandoned (Brinkman, 2015). Accordingly, as our drafting of the article commenced, the lead author continued to watch, listen to, read and think with (Jackson, 2017) the interview material with a keen sense of 'where' (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). It was through this mode of analysis that we traced the relational practices of the peer group and how these were constitutive of contingent spaces of peer learning.

Before discussing the empirical material, it is necessary to situate international students' practices in relation to the broader social context and the changing higher educational landscape. International student mobility to Australia first began at scale in the early 1990s, when the Federal Government's Dawkins Reforms streamlined public funding to institutions and created financial incentives to attract international students (Bessant, 2002). As a consequence, the number of students studying in

Australia rose dramatically. In 1990, there were just 40 000 international students studying in higher education, yet by 2019 that number had risen to 412 250¹ (Austrade, 2022). The increase in the number of international students studying in Melbourne is bound up with the transformation of urban spaces and campus environments. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of student accommodation services in the city centre that are almost exclusively house international students, as well as new spaces of consumption and new uses of public space. As Fincher and Shaw (2011) point out, these shifting urban geographies are not neutral but can work to separate students from different backgrounds and thus become complicit in shaping racialised socialities. They might be seen as contested material gatherings that contour the ways international students are able to forge networks (Gomes, 2015), develop a sense of belonging (Balloo et al., 2021; Glass, 2018), and indeed enact spaces of peer learning.

While policymakers and institutions emphasise the mutual benefits of international student mobility, many researchers have pointed to the inequalities it can serve to reproduce. Some critics argue that this had led to international students from across parts of Asia being treated as ‘cash cows’ rather than as human beings with distinct and changing needs (Robertson, 2011). Others point out how media representations of international students as privileged individuals have led to forms of discrimination and violence, such as racially motivated attacks on different cultural groups (Baas, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic reignited public debate about the rights and responsibilities of international students in Australia and elsewhere (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2022). In a critical review of educational research across the globe, Deuchar (2022) suggests that binary depictions of international students as a ‘vulnerable group in need of intervention’ or as a ‘privileged group promoting their own interests’ are both conceptually problematic. Each of them only partially considers the agency of international students and both downplay how they actively shape higher education. Researchers argue that a more robust focus on the diversity of practices that constitute the daily lives of international students will highlight their capacities and enliven educational research (Deuchar, 2022; Finn & Holton, 2019; Straker, 2016). It is in this spirit that we show how spaces of peer learning were enacted among international students.

Making space and finding room

Finding suitable accommodation has long been a challenge for international students in Australia, with the literature pointing to how a lack of affordability and access to information can exacerbate students’ hardships (Paltridge et al., 2010). In this study, seeking accommodation was a critical moment for international students, not just for the immediate needs that accommodation meets, but for the opportunity to develop important relationships with their peers. Prior to arriving in Australia, Chinh, for instance, had graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Social Work from Vietnam National University and had worked in a community development role. In late 2021, he received a scholarship to study a Master of Social Work in Australia. When he arrived in Melbourne, he was offered a room free of charge for a week from another Vietnamese student. Chinh shared the flat with three other Vietnamese students, two women and one man, who had also just arrived to study in Australia. This gave him time to find his own accommodation and

meant he was able to form close ties with people in a similar situation. The flat was a vibrant space of coming together that held Chinh in proximity with other bodies, at once a kind of refuge from the world 'out there' and a vital space of mutual becoming. For Chinh, these relationships worked as a springboard for exploring the city which was crucial for how he settled into Australia. As he put it:

And that first initial day, when we went anywhere in Melbourne, we went together and we explored the city together during that first week. And it was a really memorable week for me as a new student here.

Chinh's comments animate the dynamism of enacted spaces of peer learning; he refers to friendships he developed in his temporary flat and affective attachments that were made and remade as he moved through the urban landscape. These are social and material practices that are 'embedded, embodied and yet flowing in a web of relations with human and non-human others' (Braidotti, 2019, p. 34).

Spaces of accommodation were not just important for international students who had just arrived. Indeed, accommodation spaces were often sites that nurtured affective bonds and ties throughout the duration of international students' degrees. They afforded a degree of intimacy and privacy yet also facilities and domestic objects for 'home making practices' (Holton & Riley, 2016). Ling, an Architecture student from China, for instance, referred to the student accommodation of his two Chinese friends as his 'home in the night' and his own nearby apartment as his 'home in the day'. He said that he feels this way about his friends' room because he goes there very frequently and eats dinner there most nights of the week. Having studied in Australia for over a year, Ling gave a short but visceral account of these 'home making practices' and their materiality when he stated:

We cook together. I think in some ways that Chinese food is quite different from the Australians. Because we like to cook things with a big fire, and really smokey, I think.

Attachments to notions of 'home' arguably took on greater significance for international students during COVID-19, as sites of safety and refuge, but also sites that held them at a distance from one's family and loved ones (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). Within this context, a space that afforded Ling and his friends the opportunity to cook together was both functional and affecting. By cooking and sharing 'smokey' food, they were building new ties that marked their position as students living abroad at the same time as they registered connections to their home country.

The vitality of these spaces was especially well drawn by Meera, a Management student from India, who discussed informal 'chai nights' she regularly hosted in her room. She explained that these nights were opportunities to get together with friends, 'just listen to music, talk and chill for a while', yet they were important for 'keeping us all going'. The affective force of these spaces was undeniable – on any given evening Meera would spend up to three hours in her student accommodation with about eight friends, drinking chai and 'just pulling each other's leg'. She said these nights invariably went longer than intended and they had to force each other to leave. While placing emphasis on just 'having fun', in some moments these spaces fostered a sociality that was inseparable from Meera's efforts to excel in her studies. As Meera explained:

... one day before our exam, we came together and discussed the case that we had in exam. So we had group studies as well. And apart from that, also people who are not in the same

subjects, we talk about studies and how they're doing and how they're going about assignments or what subjects [they're doing], like for example, if someone has done a subject that I want to do in future. So, we talk about that . . .

For Meera and those who gathered in her room, these were vibrant spaces where bodies and material and immaterial 'things' – chai, furniture, food, gossip, jokes, music, phones, speakers – created an affecting atmosphere (B. Anderson, 2009; Bille & Simonsen, 2021). This atmosphere was a constitutive force in peer learning practices that imbued international study with meaning.

Of further significance across these examples is how the lines between forms of knowledge generated through study and classroom practice and knowledge generated through social and material practice are blurred (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). In contrast to educational literatures that frame learning as a cognitive and individual process that occurs principally in classrooms, for Meera and others, sociality and reciprocity at home were indistinguishable from their efforts to do well in their studies. Moreover, the spaces in which international students developed these knowledges and relationships were not discrete but rather intricately connected with other sites around Melbourne and beyond. Chinh alluded to this above, when he explained how he explored the city with fellow Vietnamese students with whom he shared accommodation. Later in the interview, he discussed how he developed and shared situated forms of knowledge to manage the practicalities of living in Melbourne. As Chinh explained:

. . . like when we find some difficulties or if there's some lesson we learned as we explore the city, we also share with each other, like the experience about how to use the transport, like how to use the tram, how to use the bus. And also, I was the first one who used the train in the room among the four students. And after I used the train, I'd go back and share with them how to do that.

These comments are notable not only in how they allude to the interconnectivity of spaces and how knowledge moves through them, but also for how they invoke the language of formal education – 'some lesson we learned' – to refer to situated knowledges of everyday practice. The language of formal education works in the context of Chinh's personal relationships precisely because peer learning is a relational activity that occurs within and beyond the classroom.

These empirical examples are not intended to suggest all participants had a seamless and productive time settling into Australia. Nor are they intended to suggest that accommodation facilities were necessarily productive, suitable or conducive to peer learning. Indeed, several students had difficulties with their living arrangements, and we discuss some of their experiences below. Even so, some participants' negative experiences serve to underscore the potentiality of enacted spaces of peer learning for making studying in Australia meaningful. We now extend this argument by considering international students' peer learning practices on and around campus.

How to excel in studies and where to get cheap pizza

Many participants discussed how the demands of their degrees became a springboard for developing close bonds with other international students. Oftentimes, students met in classrooms and were required to form groups to complete assignments as part

of their degrees. In other instances, participants formed study groups informally, without being directed to do so by educators. The ties international students generated in these ways were often crucial for helping them navigate their degrees and for getting a better grasp of their course content. Some said that if they did not understand something an educator had said, they would prefer to ask another student for assistance before asking a tutor. In class, they might quietly ask the person sitting next to them a question, or perhaps post it on a digital class discussion board or group chat. In these instances, the classroom was constitutive of a peer group that acted as a site of ‘translation’.

In surmising the importance of these peer learning practices, Li Na, an Accounting and Finance student from China, said:

Sometimes when my classmates get confused about some knowledge, I will try to explain to them with my knowledge, because I think it’s a very good way to communicate what we have learned. We can exchange our minds together, to find out if we have some misunderstanding about this knowledge. I like to help others in the study field . . .

For Li Na, learning is an explicitly relational process, where knowledge is developed through engagement with peers (Hickey & Riddle, 2022). The space of the classroom haunted the interview – oftentimes invoked as a site of disorientation and uncertainty, at other moments one of strategy, generation, and repair.

Other participants’ were more explicit in their rendering of the spatiality of peer learning practices. Campuses, for instance, figured in discussions about peer learning as vital spaces for peer group formation and learning. Fang, an Engineering student from China, for instance, described how attending student clubs and associations on campus was a productive way of meeting ‘like-minded people’. But he also referred to how campus drew him into proximity to other students and how this precipitated friendships and bonds:

On campus, I can meet people in lectures or during these workshops. I can talk to people sitting next to me, discuss the assignments and also the questions we may have. That’s a kind of way, I guess, I mingle with new friends . . . friends that I can go places with, hang out every week, yeah.

For Fang, campus was a generative space that brought international students into proximity. It participated in learning practices insofar as it mixed and put people together, ‘concentrating flows of actors and distributing them so as to compromise a productive force in time-space’ (Latour & Yaneva, 2017, p. 109).

Yet participants also implied that campus was a site that needed to be ‘learned’ – itself a dynamic and continuously changing space – that was enacted through configurations of practice. In her second semester of study, Uma became a peer mentor through a program where she assisted first year undergraduate students as they began their degrees. She explained how she coordinated face to face informal meetings with mentees and emphasised the spatial dynamics of this process:

So we’d play games and ice breakers and then we used to . . . What do you say? Set up different meeting spots. So once in this garden, then this library, then that room. So that way they can see the campus as well, if it’s in a different place every week. So yeah, it was fun . . .

[Mentees] essentially asked about my experiences at university, the events I should tell them about, the space, the study spaces they should go to, the restaurants like I said, cheap coffee, cheap pizza, and they're set. So, all of those things and then yeah, they said they really got something out of it.

One reason Uma's mentees may have found this effective was because it was a markedly situated form of peer learning where relevant information was shared at the right time and place (Gee 2004). In this sense it was a social and material practice of relationality that was situated in potent ways. The space of the campus was a critical actant in framing peer learning practices – sometimes contouring the learning that emerged. Other participants alluded to similar dynamics as they mentioned different spaces on and around university. One participant was shown how to conduct searches and how to borrow books from the library by his more experienced peer, while others spoke about visits to study spaces on campus or to cafes for lunch. They discussed these activities in the context of their social activity and simply 'hanging out' with friends, yet it was through these seemingly mundane relational practices and mobilities that spaces of peer learning were enacted (Finn & Holton, 2019).

Participants also registered the connectivity of campuses with other important spaces nearby. This point was demonstrated by Chinh as he discussed learning with his fellow students. His comments were interesting for how they located different sites as important for peer learning without privileging a particular one of them, and for gesturing toward how movement between settings was bound up with learning. Chinh stated:

One of my friends from Vietnam, another student, she had a lot of experience conducting research and using management software many times before. So, she shared that with me in the class . . . And when we go back home and when we hang out with each other, we discuss and just by chance, we get more information from each other and may exchange the known and the unknown. . .

These comments connected with those of other international students who spoke about how peer groups that formed in classrooms became vehicles for enacting spaces elsewhere. For instance, several participants discussed how they ventured to sites around and beyond Melbourne with their friends, such as restaurants, shopping centres and tourist destinations. These practices worked to consolidate ties among peers by registering the connections between them as more than just classmates: it was through these kinds of relational practices and everyday mobilities that classmates might become friends (cf. Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). These peer learning practices enabled students to navigate their degrees, understand course content, and helped them foster a sense of connection to people and places at university. Having centred the more productive aspects of these spaces so far, the following section mainly focuses on instances when they were not productively assembled.

Undoing spaces of peer learning

Several international students referenced the importance of peer learning for fostering vital knowledges and relationships. Participants regularly discussed these relationships in conjunction with spatial references. Siti, a Public Policy and Management student from Indonesia, stated that time in Australia has been productive mostly because of

‘... my surroundings, my housemate and also my fellow Indonesian friends’. Arif, a Law student from Indonesia, stated that he had primarily been supported in Australia by ‘friendship’, before adding ‘But I think the other thing is the atmosphere and the nuance ... the quality of the lecturers here and the quality of other students here are exceptional’. These responses reference the affecting atmospheres and non-human world that their relations are bound with and move through (Braidotti, 2019). Nevertheless, some international students faced struggles in Australia. Unpacking these processes troubles depictions of enacted spaces of peer learning as strictly harmonious and offers insights into the relations of power and spatial orderings that held them together.

In the most immediate sense, it needs to be acknowledged that most students in this study came from privileged social backgrounds. While some had received scholarships to study in Australia, most were able to meet the associated expenses of their own accord. This meant that access to the enacted spaces of peer learning was mediated by economic resources (Andersson et al., 2012). This placed some of the participants in our study in an ambiguous position. Duong, a Law student from Vietnam, briefly shared a room with other Vietnamese students in the city when he first arrived but he had to move to an outer suburb that was more affordable. Even though he lived with another international student, he said he felt lonely:

Well, I am living in [an outer suburb]. I have a room in [that suburb]. So, it’s a very quiet neighborhood with mostly elderly people and families in the neighborhood. So, there’s not much community bonding activity going on. So, whenever we go home from the school, from the university, it’s just us inside the house.

Duong’s comments reveal the immediate and vital ways that spaces were bound up with the formation of peer groups. As with Duong, other students discussed drawbacks living in outer suburbs entailed, such as the time and expense of commuting to university, or the inconvenience of going to the supermarket and carrying heavy groceries home on public transport. A critical aspect of enacted spaces of peer learning, therefore, was that they were in relative proximity and vitally connected to other people, spaces, infrastructures and resources. Crucially, no one agent acted alone in this process – but objects and the forces they issued forth (‘heavy groceries’) made some configurations of practice impractical (Taylor, 2018). For some human participants, these impracticalities were mitigated by proximities to amenities and services, but for some international students, this was a proximity that they were unable to afford, especially in the longer term.

In this sense, Duong’s comments contrast with those of another participant who lived in the inner city, who said that playing basketball offered him the opportunity to meet new friends and engage with young people from a range of backgrounds. For this latter student, the space of the basketball court became a critical site of sociality and skilled practice during his time abroad. He would regularly meet friends there and build ties by engaging in physical and social activity (basketball) that they found compelling (Gee, 2004).

This is not to suggest that living in urban centres always led to productive ties among international students. The inference Duong made to loneliness was also made by some international students who could afford student accommodation in the city. Some international students who lived in student accommodation near university spoke

about not being used to living alone, 'staring at the wall' in a tiny room and feeling like an outsider at social events organised by accommodation providers. Some participants also discussed how their capacity to form ties with their peers was sometimes negatively affected by the spatial and temporal ordering of university life (Nespor, 1994). In some instances, it was simply that the demands of their degrees were such that they chose to spend time alone studying. This was especially the case during exam periods.

But there were also instances where students' timetables made it hard to meet others. Arif spoke about how his two month course consisted of one month of preparation studying alone, five full days of intensive face to face classes, and then one month preparing for examinations. This made it hard for him to meet friends in his course and to spend time with students who had regular classes. In a similar vein, Jing, a Computer Science student from China, said that he found it difficult to meet friends because he only spent two hours per week with students in any given class. Consequently, he said he could 'count on one hand' the number of friends he had made during his postgraduate degree. A final example that bore directly on the spatial organisation of campus came from Qiao, who said that she liked studying in the library but said there were limited options for lunch nearby. This meant that she opted to study in her room more frequently than she otherwise would. These examples serve to illustrate the point that not all students could partake in peer learning practices in productive ways. In other words, the vibrancy of these was enacted and thus fleeting; they were constituted not of fixed or transferrable relations but through contingent forces of human and non-human actors (Latour & Yaneva, 2017).

Conclusions

Recent critical research with international students has sought to challenge stereotypical depictions of international students (Hayes & Lomer, 2023, Heng and Lu, 2023; Montgomery, 2023), foreground their practices and capacities (Deuchar, 2022; Jayadeva, 2020), and advance more ethical and democratic methodological approaches (Spangler, 2023). Corresponding research has considered how to move away from pedagogic practices that cast international students as a problem to be solved (Mittelman et al., 2023; Reed, 2023). Taken together, this research constitutes what can be understood as an 'anti-deficit' turn in research with international students (Deuchar, 2023b). This article has contributed to this emerging work by examining the ways spaces of peer learning are enacted among international students in higher education. Drawing on posthuman theories, we have traced some of the ways spaces of peer learning are enacted when international students seek and settle into accommodation, as well as how they are formed on and around campus. We have also attended to instances in which spaces of peer learning were not productively assembled. The main argument has been that enacted spaces of peer learning generate critical knowledge and relationships among international students that make studying abroad meaningful. This final section unpacks this argument and considers its significance for research regarding international students, peer learning and higher education.

In the most immediate instance, our argument insists that peer learning among international students is a decidedly affirmative practice. Participants articulated the importance of affective ties and bonds among other international students, with many

explaining how these relationships helped them navigate their degrees. Our study therefore contrasts with the thrust of educational research that identifies interaction with domestic students as key to a successful experience, and that casts interaction among international students as a deficit (cf. Lomer & Anthony-Okeke, 2019; Page & Chahboun, 2019). It also invokes relational pedagogies that trouble depictions of educators as authoritative bearers of meaning by highlighting how international students generate vital knowledge themselves (Hickey & Riddle, 2022). At times, participants generated knowledge that was strictly related to their courses and assignments. At other times, students shared mundane information that helped them meet their day-to-day needs, such as where to buy groceries and how to get around. These forms of knowledge were deeply interconnected: knowing how to catch public transport was useful for getting to class on time, knowing where to buy groceries kept one nourished during periods of study. The value of these forms of knowledge converged in how they made studying abroad more meaningful and fulfilling for international students.

Yet a posthuman sensibility has enabled us to draw out and consider how other actors partake in the formation of enacted spaces of learning. Theorising space as a dynamic and emergent process, we have paid attention to how spatial arrangements call forth relational practices among peers. Enacted spaces of peer learning do not just *exist* but can instead be seen as a relational achievement (Mulcahy et al., 2015). In some instances, spaces of accommodation were large enough to comfortably house students and host guests, yet small enough to hold them in proximity. They were also located where they were easily accessible by others; most of Meera's guests lived in the same accommodation complex, Ling's 'home in the night' was just a short walk from his own. At the same time, some international students felt isolated living in a 'tiny room', while others found it hard to make friends living in outer suburbs. In contrast to humanist theorising and that which treats space as a passive backdrop to educational processes, our analysis draws into focus the spatial and material dynamics of peer learning. Doing so helps to appreciate how and where peer groups are formed, how they were held together, and moments in which they fell apart.

Perhaps what our study draws out most clearly is that peer learning is a decidedly spatial practice. Viewing human beings as continuous with the material world (cf. Fenwick, 2012), we have shown how the practices of peer groups are inseparable from – and constitutive of – the spaces they enact. What is more, we have shown how enacted spaces of peer learning are themselves generative. Further research might consider how a diversity of human and non-human actors shape spaces of higher education (Fenwick, 2012; Gourlay, 2021; Gravett et al., 2021). It might give more attention to how a broader range of relationships, such as those between students and educators, are constituted through spatial and material interactions. This might be part of an effort to consider how digital practices among various actors foster novel and emergent social configurations. Scholars might pursue these lines of inquiry in a diversity of contexts with a diversity of students, while attending to different material orientations and affordances of various posthuman theories. Such research would not strictly be an academic endeavour, for posthumanism is a practical philosophy that aims to intervene in the world (Gravett et al., 2021). It is by revealing the limits and possibilities of contingent assemblages, that posthuman theory suggests orderings where practices of relationality and care might flourish (Deuchar and Gorur, 2023).

Note

1. This number does not include international students in VET, Schools, ELICOS or non-award institutions. The total number of international students in Australia including these institutions was 805 514 in 2019 (Austrade, 2022).

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