

## Conceptions of power & equity as moderating forces in international higher education and international relations

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# Conceptions of Power & Equity as Moderating Forces in International Higher Education and International Relations

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Perceptions of the nature and functioning of the world are broadly influenced by societal paradigm shifts that impact nearly all fields of study, including political science, environmental science, educational psychology/pedagogy, economics, human/civil rights, etc. This paper refers to these elements as ‘moderating forces’ in the context of international higher education (IHE) because of their ability to question or alter not only the conceptions of theories and practices within the academic and professional field, but also the understanding of the realized outcomes of those theories and practices on different stakeholder groups. Changing understandings of power and equity in stakeholder relations fall under the umbrella of these moderating forces and bear consequences for practices and outcomes within both the field of IHE and the field of international relations (IR), among others. Since changing conceptions of power and equity serve as moderating forces on both fields individually, it stands to reason that they are also moderating forces over the area where these two fields overlap, particularly when considering the potential for IHE to be used as a conduit of soft power within IR, a topic which will be discussed later in this work. Understanding how this concept functions is then crucial for analyzing the interplay of these fields moving forward.

In the IHE literature, increasing attention and focus has been placed on the internationalization of higher education and notions of diversity, equity, and

inclusion, which has provided scholars and practitioners with an updated understanding of power and equity in the field (Özturgut, 2017; Jones et al., 2021). This heightened intensity of consideration is warranted, given how inequity creates, or is caused by, power imbalances between stakeholders, which lead to further inequities in these relational contexts, resulting in a cycle that is hard to break (Brandenburg et al., 2020; Buckner & Stein, 2019; Marginson, 2022). In the IHE space, the beneficiaries of power imbalances have largely been the higher education institutions (HEIs) of the West/Global North, where, intentionally or not, these institutions have exploited the advantage granted by systemic inequity. Examples of this exploitation of the dominant relational position include the prevalence of English as the preferred language among a majority of international scientific journals/publications (Valcke, 2020), colonial practices at international branch campuses (Clarke, 2021; Xu, 2021), one-sided dealing in global partnerships (Lanford, 2021), neglecting engagement with higher education institutions in the East (Altbach & de Wit, 2015) and Global South (Dutta, 2020), refusing to accept or recognize Indigenous knowledge (Huaman et al., 2019; Patel, 2017) and the pervasive use of university ranking systems (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2007; Marope et al., 2013). Findings such as these have contributed to what has become an evolving paradigm shift in IHE as an academic field and as a professional practice, acknowledg-

ing a need to realign the internationalization of higher education to improve overall outcomes for all stakeholders in the global society, not just those that benefit from relational power imbalances (Jones et al., 2021). Thus, modern conceptions of power and equity can be understood as moderating forces which influence the theoretical underpinnings and practical outcomes of IHE.

While the aforementioned (and non-exhaustive) list of practices may be problematic and produce uneven outcomes within the context of IHE, one can understand how troubling this also is for countries at the lower end of power and equity imbalances, when considering the sizable role that IHE plays in the broader realm of IR. While the theory of soft power investigates the overall strategies countries employ in an effort to influence one another without use of direct military or financial force (Nye, 2004), scholars have identified higher education as a key soft power strategic area (Wojciuk et al., 2015), as HEIs/IHE can be used to proliferate a country's political ideals, instill sympathies for the country of the host institution in its international students/faculty members and to forge personal relationships with future leaders from abroad (Nye, 2005). It can then be argued that the influence of power imbalances in IHE occurs at multiple levels of analysis – not just at the institutional level, but also at the country level. As opposed to previous interpretations of IHE that postured the concept as a neutral process and neglected relational dynamics (de Wit, 2023), the updated conceptions of power and equity have enabled scholars to also recognize unequal outcomes in the IR space as it pertains to higher education, and recent studies have thus called for new approaches to realign and balance the dynamics in these relational contexts. These new approaches, including knowledge diplomacy (Knight, 2017, 2022) and cultural diplomacy (Canales, 2023), seek to remove power imbalances from the relational equation by focusing on equity between partners to produce mutual benefit and exchange instead of exploitation, coercion, and influence. HEIs and governing bodies are then encouraged by researchers and the broader public to engage with stakeholders across their campus, in their local constituencies and in their broader partnership networks to design their international missions and strategies in a way that accounts for potential externalities, that is, how programs/initia-

tives might cause unintended harm upon represented, unrepresented, known, or unknown stakeholder groups. Here it is again evident that changing understandings of power and equity serve as a moderating force on the interplay between IHE and IR.

Particularly as critiques of IHE (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011) and calls for a realignment toward global social responsibility and the internationalization of higher education for society (Jones et al., 2021) continue to rise, and as the evolution of the role of IHE in IR and diplomacy persists (Canales, 2023; Knight, 2022), it is imperative to recognize how updated conceptions of power, equity and other moderating forces influence fundamental changes of perspective in these fields. Further research should then work to build conceptual frameworks that map out the nature of this influence so that the relationship between moderating forces, theory, practice, and outcomes can be better understood. Consequently, the results of these studies could inform policymakers and practitioners so that the field may adjust more quickly to produce better outcomes for the global society, namely, increased value and quality of IHE for stakeholders, regardless of their national context or their relative power.

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