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## VIEWPOINTS

# Neoliberalism and Public University Agendas: Tensions along the Global/Local Divide

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**Abstract:** Over the last decade, internationalization efforts have accelerated at leading postsecondary institutions in North America and elsewhere, with universities now aggressively competing for the most talented students worldwide. With the focus on recruiting international students, one of the major attendant objectives has seemingly been a social-justice-oriented agenda on tackling pressing global issues; the local has indeed become the global. However, not everyone is ostensibly benefiting from this new global focus. For some, their local issues and conditions are increasingly precarious and nonprioritized in institutional and broadening neoliberal governmental agendas. In the Canadian context, various Indigenous and low-income racialized communities, youth in particular, face multiple implications of this reality. For these communities, secondary school completion and postsecondary educational attainment are decreasing, while incarceration rates among the youth are significantly increasing. In this viewpoint paper, we briefly highlight two localized program examples, sharing our experiences as educators, and call for a constructive dialogue regarding how universities' social justice agendas can better work for all people, both locally and globally.

**Keywords:** higher education, internationalization, social justice, postsecondary education, Indigenous communities, low-income communities, race, local, global

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### Introduction

Globalization driven by neoliberal interests has had a significant impact on societies, politics, economies, and ecological systems around the world. Postsecondary institutions, specifically research-intensive universities, are privileged places which have long sustained global linkages with other centers of knowledge production and dissemination as part of their educational mission. With increasing pressure from various global neoliberal forces, universities—especially those that are publicly funded—must rapidly engage in activities to locate and secure new revenue sources. Governments in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, among others, in the midst of the volatile global economic climate, have advanced and implemented economic austerity measures, which in some cases have led to unprecedented reductions in postsecondary sector governmental funding (Trilokekar and Kizilbash 2013; Parliament of Australia 2013).

With the focus on international students, one of the major attendant objectives has been a social-justice-oriented agenda on tackling pressing global issues; the local has indeed become the global. However, not everyone is ostensibly benefiting from this new global focus. For some, their local issues and conditions are

increasingly precarious and nonprioritized in institutional and broadening neoliberal governmental agendas. In the Canadian context, various Indigenous and low-income racialized communities, youth in particular, face multiple implications of this reality. For these communities, secondary school completion and postsecondary educational attainment are decreasing and incarceration rates among the youth are significantly increasing. Building upon current debates regarding the decolonizing of institutions and the internationalization of higher education, especially research from Indigenous, anti-racist, and feminist scholars, we want to highlight the implications of globalized higher education on local Indigenous and racialized low-income students and their communities. As members of and educators within these communities, we voice our concerns that while the broader social-justice-oriented institutional and governmental agendas are important, they still serve to reify the liminal position of local Indigenous and low-income racialized communities. As critical educators, we believe it is our role and responsibility to contribute to and advance public debates on education; we are committed to education remaining a means for social transformation that benefits all who participate—including young marginalized voices not being heard for a multitude of reasons. In other words, we must educate through and for social justice. As Marilyn Cochran-Smith notes, social-justice-oriented approaches in education refer to standpoints and scholarly traditions that

actively address the dynamics of oppression, privilege, and isms, while recognizing that society is the product of historically rooted, institutionally sanctioned stratification along socially constructed group lines that include race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. (quoted in Sensoy and Diangelo 2009, 350)

Working for social justice in education, she also notes, means guiding students or community members “in critical self-reflection of their socialization into this matrix of unequal relationships and its implications, analysis of the mechanisms of oppression, and the ability to challenge these hierarchies” (quoted in Sensoy and Diangelo 2009, 350). As described by Cochran-Smith, across social justice agendas there are multiple theoretical perspectives and practical approaches that can be taken in order to achieve the aims of these agendas, including institutional internationalization imperatives. While we are not steadfastly opposed to the internationalization of education, but rather embrace the possibilities of institutional change that undergird robust internationalization efforts—such as a willingness to engage multiple knowledge systems, or making curricular changes that are reflective of diverse people and experiences—we are concerned when institutional social justice agendas become closely linked to normative discourses of globalization, including the pursuit and exploration of new markets and unquestioned primacy of economic growth and notions of “progress” (Roman 2003). It is clear to us that postsecondary institutions must simultaneously and appropriately serve the needs and interests of their increasingly diverse constituents, as well as interrogate the implicit neoliberal bias of their internationalization efforts.

### **The Internationalization of Education in Canada**

Canada’s interest in internationalization is said to have arisen from its post–World War II policies inclined towards a humanist form of developmental assistance for states emerging from various liberation struggles, especially from colonial rule (Trilokekar, Jones and Shubert 2009). This early humanist developmental focus garnered Canada an international reputation as a benevolent state interested in assisting those anguished by social and economic issues, including war and exacerbated poverty. However, this focus took a neoliberal policy turn towards expanding economic growth through addressing domestic labor market needs, commercialization, and diplomatic interests (Trilokekar 2015). Increasingly, international students, particularly at the postsecondary level, can be seen from a policy perspective as a means to further these

new priorities by contributing to the market value of higher education (Abrahams and FitzGerald 2002). In addition to paying market-level tuition fees and associated living expenses, such students began filling labor market needs where possible and acting as ambassadors for their diverse countries of origin. While discussing “the language of diversity,” Sara Ahmed broaches upon such university marketing strategies:

Through marketing, universities not only have a logo, and even a brand, but they also attribute themselves with some qualities (and not others), as being a certain kind of organization. The ideal image of the university has effects: if the university sees itself as research-led, for example, and as being elite and global, then this orientation clearly involves forms of commitment in pursuit of that ideal image. So the work of creating a university is about the organization of commitment: the university “decides” how to commit its resources, or is even brought into being as an effect of such decisions that are repeated over time, but which are forgotten in time. (2007, 243)

It is no surprise, then, that Canada’s federal government’s leveraging of the state’s historical reputation of benevolence and espousing its postsecondary sector as globally inclined has taken an “exclusive focus” on international student recruitment and the retention of graduates as immigrants (Trilokekar 2015, 9). Indeed, this strategy has resulted in significant implications for public institutions of higher education whose core missions revolve around advancing knowledge and engaging in activities that promote teaching and learning. Public universities have responded to governmental mandates amidst funding cuts and the need to sustain fiscal viability by engaging feverishly in internationalization, which has resulted in changing university policies to meet the new globalized objectives.

In the debates surrounding internationalization of Canadian public universities, student groups such as the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) have added their voices to those of administrators and scholars through the development of an international-student-focused policy paper, which calls for fairness in assessing market-rate tuition for international students. Members of the group rally for necessary support for international students to thrive within Canadian educational institutions. Still aligned with neoliberal economic interests, however, OUSA supports the view that job creation and economic impact in Canada are critical factors in increasing international student enrollment (Fernlund et al. 2014). Likewise, their policy paper fails to mention how internationalization directly impacts diverse local student populations, or how universities might balance international and local enrollment interests, retention, and engagement with local communities.

The change in policy within Canadian higher education calls for a questioning of institutional priorities. Specifically, we, as educators, question how universities intend to simultaneously prioritize the needs and interests of local Indigenous (Aboriginal) and local racialized (predominantly Black) low-income students and their enrollment, retention, and postsecondary success. As Ross Finnie, Stephen Childs, and Andrew Wismer (2011) highlight in their study on underrepresented groups in postsecondary education in Canada, the educational needs of visible minorities or racialized students mirror broader needs within their communities as a result of historical and structural barriers to participation and success within postsecondary institutions. Student respondents in this study reported feeling they did not belong in their institutions nor felt that their faculties were supportive of them. They also reported lower on the projected long-term benefits of postsecondary education compared to their nonracialized Canadian and foreign-born peers (Finnie, Childs and Wismer 2011). Autoethnographic accounts such as those by Black woman scholars report that even as faculty members in administrative leadership roles they experience “not belonging, having their authority delegitimized, and a sense of a presumed incompetence among their peers and staff” (Henry 2015, 14). Meanwhile, research similarly shows that Indigenous youth continue to be significantly

underrepresented in postsecondary education in Canada despite mindful efforts to reverse this trend (White et al. 2009). For local communities, specifically Indigenous communities and low-income racialized communities, much is at stake when considering the broader social issues surrounding internationalization.

In 2012, the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child reported some alarming concerns specific to Indigenous (Aboriginal) and one particular racialized group of Canadians (Black or African Canadians). These concerns arose *after* the conclusion of a ten-year review of Canada's treatment of its children and the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In terms of quality of life indicators, access to education, and imprisonment, the report noted the need for the prioritization of accessible and well-resourced social services for vulnerable children, and specifically for the aforementioned two groups, as well as other minoritized children. Furthermore, the report expressed alarm at the "inappropriate and excessive use of disciplinary measures applied to Aboriginal and African Canadian children in school (primary and secondary), such as resorting to suspension and referring children to the police" (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2012, 16). It also highlights the "overrepresentation of Aboriginal and African Canadian youth in detention," showing, for example, that Aboriginal youth are more likely to be detained by the criminal justice system than to graduate from high school. The reports recommendations are specific in relation to Aboriginal and African Canadian children and youth, urging the Canadian government to take immediate action to address the underlying systemic issues that enable overrepresentation of these children and youth in the legal and judicial systems. As Douglas Brownridge notes, Aboriginal peoples, who represent merely three percent of the Canadian population, make up seventeen percent of federal inmates (Brownridge 2003). Without investment in supporting such communities we may continue to see upward trends in statistics like these.

Given the social inequalities faced by Aboriginal and Black youth, Canadian public universities have an opportunity to play a unique role in helping to mitigate the damaging experiences of low educational attainment and high incarceration within correctional services in Canada. Our concern is that failing to invest in our youth will result in dramatically increased social costs as well as lost potential. Necessary interventions could include community engagement and research projects for scholars and current students, with vital community members in focus. Valuable research and community-specific interventions can create pathways to university education attainment.

## **Two Local Examples**

Before examining two local community engagement projects, we must consider educational privilege in relation to students from Aboriginal and racialized low-income communities that do attend public postsecondary institutions. Two decades ago, bell hooks noted that feminist movements and theorizing on feminism were increasingly becoming commodified, and thus more exclusive to those with socioeconomic privilege. She urged that these processes of commodification be interrogated and disrupted, and called for a renewed "commitment to transformative politics and practice" (hooks 1994, 71) that would lead to generative social change. We share in hooks's sentiment that classrooms can be spaces of immense possibility to engage in dialogue around intersecting forms of oppression within educational institutions. However, for Aboriginal and racialized low-income students, the classroom environment can still be a hostile place, where their identities must assume the onslaught of discursive dissection and where their complex histories are relegated to a guilt-ridden past. Shireen Roshanravan highlights such concerns about marginalized postsecondary education seekers:

Because the colonized and racially dispossessed are historically constructed as outsiders in their own “home,” re-inhabiting “home” through their lens would necessitate engaging, for example, disjunctions and confrontations between indigenous and settler colonial histories. (2012, 2)

Indeed, collaborative research led by Donna Lester-Smith (2012) highlights that for many Indigenous people in Canada the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and forced governmental apprehension of children into state “care” has led to the erosion of aspects of Indigenous cultural values, traditional knowledge, languages, and community and family unity in exchange for intergenerational trauma and lateral and intimate-partner violence. Many students, in fact, understand that such issues being discussed are painstakingly real and the need for change urgent.

Considering this potential hostility of the traditional institutional classroom environment, we need to identify other spaces of possibility outside of, and complementary to, the classroom within academia and beyond, where all students can engage in dialogue and organize critical thought and action. Wanyenya and Vadeboncoeur (2012) suggest the possibility of learning traditional academic science and math education by interweaving Indigenous perspectives through a place-based praxis within local Indigenous communities. Such spaces for learning could include the physical places where Indigenous and racialized communities reside, where issues to deliberate are seen from the communities’ perspectives, and where the urgency of change is both conceptualized and embodied. Here, we exemplify two core spaces—one within the academy and one outside—where there exist opportunities for deliberation around questions of race, gender, and class. Although neither author has worked directly with either program, we are both, however, acutely aware of the overarching visions, missions, and positive outcomes for their participants—young, empowered, potential academic learners. To our minds, it is from within these educational spaces that negotiation of identities, tactics and strategies for political organization to transform academia and broader society can burgeon.

One such program that operates within an academic institution is the University of British Columbia’s (UBC) Emerging Aboriginal Scholars program, whereby twenty Aboriginal students in grades 10 and 11 attend a summer camp that runs for five weeks. The camp provides enriched learning opportunities in English and math, and a campus-based internship in an area of interest at the university. Students are offered opportunities to engage in cultural teachings that promote positive identification with their Aboriginal identity. While doing so, they benefit from a more solid sense of courage, through educational training, to work beyond some of the hardships experienced within some of their home communities, in order to try to become agents of change within those and other communities. Such initiatives create spaces of possibility for Aboriginal youth to see their potential to participate in and contribute to UBC, while supporting its proposed agenda to be inclusive and provide a diverse range of perspectives and life experiences that could benefit all members of the university community. Here, not only are Indigenous views and experiences reflected in the university, but youth have the possibility to explore their own positionality as members of the university community before establishing any formal, degree-bound relationship with the university. In this way, conditions are created for more innovative reimagining of how universities could serve Indigenous students and communities as a whole, while also maintaining their internationalization goals.

A second example outside of the classroom, but supporting UBC’s academic mission and diversity goals, is the Pathways to Education program, which focuses on providing the academic, social, and financial capital to youth within identified low-income (and predominantly racialized and new-immigrant) communities the means to access postsecondary education. Since the program’s inception in 2001, it has expanded across Canada throughout various communities and boasts high success rates with young, socioeconomically

disadvantaged, and predominantly racialized youth. We offer this second program model as another example whereby institutions, through various forms of support—such as capacity building and research—can foster homegrown internationalization by creating opportunities and pathways for accessing education and for local student participants to take greater leadership in their daily lives. As we have argued earlier, internationalization need not only happen abroad, or with visiting international students, in order to be effective; the strengths of globalization can also be homegrown.

In these two examples, it is important to consider the complex needs of individual students from both local and international geographies. Though the Emerging Aboriginal Scholars and Pathways to Education programs ask institutions to develop and implement internationalization strategies that include diversifying their student bodies, it is critical that recruitment, retention, and activities to foster students' success also target students from local, historically marginalized communities, including Indigenous communities and racialized low-income communities. Clearly, institutions must recognize that the globalization of higher education should incorporate local dimensions of differentials inclusive of Indigenous perspectives. Christine Asmar (2005) explores the interplay between local students and institutional internationalization efforts, suggesting that local racialized students feel their unique needs are marginalized by institutional internationalization priorities. Relatedly, Heidi Mirza (2012) navigates the complexities of being a racialized subject within university through her experiences as a Black woman in UK academe. Despite its distinct location, her testimony may help understand how Canadian racialized students navigate and negotiate their identities along tensions of being “Canadian,” which Robert Kroestch (1989) interprets as having a sense of a unified nationalist identity through a mosaic of identities that are not unified.

With increasing numbers of international students who claim a direct link to a source country or continent—which, for local racialized students, is a part of their broader nationalist or continental diaspora—new questions emerge. How are racialized students born in the Western world negotiating their imposed or assumed racial identities relative to their non-Western racialized peers? What are the implications of this negotiation on the decisions they make in higher education? What is the relationship between different diasporas and the processes of racialization within contemporary higher education? (McCarthy and Dimitriadis 2000; Reay et al. 2001). These queries become particularly salient as the category of race necessarily expands and envelops other markers of identity, such as ethnicity and nationality, markers which threaten to disunite the local and global communities brought together through the internationalization of education. As critical educators, we have encountered such tensions between two groupings: racialized Canadian-born students, with heritage from places like China and parts of Africa and the Caribbean, and international students from these same countries and regions who contribute to discourses of belonging within the institution as racialized subjects. Strategies we have employed through the UBC Emerging Aboriginal Scholars and Pathways to Education programs amidst these tensions—which include markers that threaten to extenuate questions of who holds “authentic” identities in relation to specific places and the rejection of particular nationalist and pan-nationalist identities in the pursuit of trying to belong to dominant identities—have been threefold. Firstly, we try to engage students in dialogic processes that explore needs and interests of the parties involved and demonstrate to them (a) the generative potential of their conversations about identity, and (b) how their knowledge on notions of identity production could be further explored through enrolling in courses focused on identity. Secondly, we encourage the students to attend public lectures and dialogues that center on questions of identity. Thirdly, we encourage students to join or form student groups that engage their different identities through provisional political alliances to further discourses around questions of identity, discourses which are implicitly woven throughout the

delivery of the two aforementioned program examples. As Emiko Kashima and Evelyn Loh (2006) validate, there are psychological benefits for international students who forge close ties with local students. Indeed, these close local ties result in a smoother transition to their new cultural setting and enthusiasm towards the often arduous task of university graduation (Kashima and Loh 2006). In this way, through close attention to the pedagogical needs of these diverse student groups, the internationalization of education can work to bring the local and global together.

As Daryl Smith and Natalie Schonfeld (2000) argue, activities to increase the diversity of student bodies are necessary in the changing landscape of educational institutions, fostering cultural as well as intellectual exchange. However, as we have shown, in order to leverage the benefits of diverse student bodies from local as well as international communities, activities are required that traverse the boundaries between institutions and local communities—efforts that the UBC Emerging Aboriginal Scholars and Pathways to Education programs successfully encompass. The binary between local and international students can furthermore be problematized by highlighting the international mobilization of Indigenous peoples. As Linda Smith (1999) argues, Indigenous peoples are indeed a global and not just local phenomenon for institutions—thus suggesting that there are also international Indigenous students. Through a recognition of such global Indigenous identities arise possibilities for linkages between Indigenous people from different international locations, who, through diverse Indigenous perspectives, could provide cultural insights into program delivery, activities, and correlated outcomes that attend to the needs and interests of local Aboriginal communities as a whole, and their youth members in particular.

### **Closing Thoughts**

It is imperative that educational institutions prioritize ways in which they can work with Indigenous community members to identify meaningful solutions to pressing community needs. In parallel to our goal of imagining the future of a socially just education system, Sohail Inayatullah and Jennifer Gidley (2000) envision a university that acknowledges and recognizes Indigenous epistemologies and broader indigenization: the inclusion and production of Indigenous knowledges, experiences, and worldviews of institutions. In order to see this vision to fruition, working within Indigenous frameworks that center the needs and interests of Indigenous communities within, outside and beyond the institution is vital. Moreover, respectful engagement with indigenization will not only require a paradigm shift in institutional policies and practices (Kuokkanen 2007) but also new considerations of what knowledge is produced and where it is located. These shifts in orientations would require the privileging of local knowledge, beyond classrooms and laboratories within academe, and may likely interrogate dominant modes of ethical engagement in conducting research.

While universities attend to emerging needs and interests around internationalization, such focused efforts and strategies must not lead to further marginalization of Indigenous and racialized low-income communities within academe. Research suggests that both local Indigenous and racialized low-income students may be marginalized by university priorities related to international students. As Roshanravan describes, this oversight infers a “geographic rather than an epistemic limitation” (2012, 1) towards student success. It is our hope that in order to foster equity and inclusion, universities will work to address these geographical, systemic, racial, and socioeconomic gaps. Through programmatic examples we have provided of UBC’s Emerging Aboriginal Scholars and Pathways to Education, the public university that has taken on neoliberal leanings can be reimagined to also prioritize the needs and interests of Aboriginal and racialized



low-income students and communities. A positive outcome of this shifted lens would encourage continuous engagement in the transformation of the university itself into a more welcoming and inclusive learning environment, which allows for the multiplicity of knowledges and engages in efforts to foster a more just and equitable society, both locally and globally.

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