

# Exploring inter-epistemological encounters in international HE at the intersection of ideologies of neoliberalism and ethical globalization

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## **Introduction**

Within recent years, plurality and difference have been embraced in higher education both by internationalization strategies originating in a neoliberal market-driven process as well as by counter-ideologies of ethical globalization.

The neoliberal transformation has resulted in new ontologies of the university, e.g. “the entrepreneurial university” (Barnett 2012) or “the global university” (Biesta 2011) in its external relation to society defined by its preoccupation with the economic and technical development of society and with matching the needs of the labor market (e.g. Rhoads and Szelenyi 2011, Arambewela 2010) and internally on the education market marked by universities becoming similar because they are playing the same game (Biesta 2011). Furthermore, it has enforced the power structures of the international field of HE defined by flows of people and capital towards the global North and flows of knowledge produced in the North towards the South (Marginson 2008, Calhoun 2006, Altbach 2004).

The ontological and structural changes are accompanied by a new epistemological hegemony of “useful” (Peters and Olssen 2005) or “specific, problem-solving knowledge” (Barnett 2012) and by new knowledge authorities such as consultants, professionals and free-lance experts (Barnett 2012).

However, critics of the neo-liberal university argue that the university as educator and knowledge producer should engage in a more ethical knowledge production. It is a call for an academic knowledge production that recognizes the challenges of globalization and of the interconnectedness of lives (Rhoads and Szelenyi 2011); that recognizes the world’s epistemological diversity (Santos, Nunes, and Meneses 2007); that recognizes and challenges Eurocentric paradigms (Paraskeva 2010) and makes ethical choices “in the shape of academic inquiry” (Barnett 2012, 224).

At Aarhus University, the general internationalization strategy is inscribed in a neoliberal ideology and describes the development of intercultural (IC) competence in students as both a means for success in the labor market and to success for business. The faculty-level internationalization strategies, however, both draw upon neoliberal and more ethically oriented globalization discourses and describe the aim of internationalization in terms such as developing the “flexible knowledge” needed to operate in a globalized world or “global citizenship”. However, the relationship

between the ideological approaches to internationalization, implied understandings of IC competence and the impact upon inter-epistemological encounters, understood as encounters between people and institutions socialized in or enacting different epistemological frameworks, is not reflected upon.

Seeing international higher education as a field structured by neoliberalism at one pole and counter-ideologies of ethical globalization on the other, the paper maps the interaction of these ideologies in the epistemologies at play at three international master programs at Aarhus University and in their visions of IC competence. Drawing upon educational sociology and ethical theory, it is compared to how the “different” knowledge of the other students’ is encountered, negotiated, rejected or acknowledged and made use of.

### **Methodology and data**

The paper draws upon data from three international master programs at Aarhus University. The programs were selected so that they all have diverse student bodies and so that they represent different approaches to internationalization and recruit different kinds of students.

The first program is an international business program. It attracts students pursuing a career in an international company. The program started with a vision of creating an international study environment to give the students cultural insights but today, the international aspect relates to the academic content about international business. In the program, about 50 % of the students are international. However, a large number of the international students have a bachelor degree from Aarhus University or other Danish universities.

The second program is an interdisciplinary program in Human Security. It attracts students who want to work in aid-oriented organizations or NGOs. It is a collaboration between ethnography, biology, social science and external consultants. About 65 % of the students are international and both international and interdisciplinary cooperation is stressed.

The third program is an Erasmus Mundus program in Journalism and Globalization, which offers joint degrees in cooperation with other European universities. Approximately 95 % of the students are international and the international composition of the student body is stressed as an asset. It is emphasized that the teachers speak from a liberal and European perspective but the students are encouraged to challenge it.

Data about was produced with several methods:

- Classroom observations focusing on epistemologies drawn upon by the lecturers and on how students acknowledge and negotiate knowledge relating to theoretical, methodological, political, cultural and paradigmatic aspects of the program.

- In-depth interviews with 20 students reflecting on how knowledge is negotiated between students' different epistemological systems and epistemologies drawn upon in the program.
- Policy documents relating to internationalization strategies retrieved from the university's web-page.

### **Theoretical framework**

The understanding of the field as structured around a neoliberal ideology of competition and marketization on the one hand and a counter-ideology of ethical globalization involving recognition of epistemological diversity on the other calls for a theoretical framework which both encompasses existing power-structures, processes assisting their reproduction and the ethical agency that insists on recognition of difference. In the paper, Bourdieu's educational sociology (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, Bourdieu 1989, 1986, 1994, 1977, 1988), his concepts field, habitus, capital and symbolic violence, are therefor drawn upon together with Levinas' understanding of the ethical encounter as an encounter with the other as an *other* who is not reduced to the *same* and the experience of that encounter as a trace of the other (e.g. Levinas 1996, Levinas 1986).

### **Findings and discussion**

Three main types of inter-epistemological encounters are identified:

- 1: Remaining other: the encounter as *traces* of the other's knowledge
- 2: Becoming the same: the encounter as reduction and merger of epistemological positions
- 3: Rejecting the other: the encounter as reproduction of hegemonic epistemologies

Finally, the paper will discuss the relationship between the typologies and the ideological approaches and the embedding of IC competence in neoliberal frameworks as potential barrier to fruitful inter-epistemological encounters.

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