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Global encounters, local identities: autoethnographic reflections on University of Jyväskylä's internationalization policies and practices

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of two Pakistani doctoral researchers at the University of Jyväskylä (JYU), Finland, highlighting the disconnect between the university's internationalization policies and the realities faced by non-Western students. Employing autoethnography, the study reveals systemic Eurocentric biases and linguistic imperialism, leading to significant psychological challenges like alienation and identity crises. It critiques the paradoxical impact of Finnish language courses, demonstrating how policies aimed at inclusivity inadvertently marginalize non-Finnish speakers. The findings advocate for policy reforms that address the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of international students, calling for a decolonized approach to higher education internationalization that truly embraces cultural and linguistic diversity.

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Introduction

Amidst the cozy ambiance of a dimly lit coffee shop, where the soft murmur of Finnish conversations enveloped us, my friend and I found a safe haven. Here, in the warmth of this refuge and in the comforting embrace of our native language, Urdu, we freely exchanged stories about our lives in both Pakistan and Finland, delving into the trials and triumphs of our academic journey and the challenges we encountered while embracing the concept of internationalization in higher education (de Wit, 2019). In our homeland of Pakistan, the echoes of 'internationalization' were faint, drowned out by deep-rooted socio-political issues. We studied in a system grappling with adapting to a rapidly globalizing world (Ahmad et al., 2014), striving to foster a knowledge-based economy and attract international students. Yet, the concept of internationalization remained distant, more theoretical than practical. Our leap from Pakistan to Finland for doctoral studies was, therefore, not just geographical, but also conceptual. Suddenly, we were not just observing the internationalization of higher education from the side-lines; we were living it, experiencing it first-hand. Before our arrival in Finland, internationalization had been an abstract term, devoid of personal resonance. Yet, from our first interaction with the University of Jyväskylä (JYU), we understood internationalization as a dynamic process, vital for the university's growth and evolution. It was no longer a distant concept confined to policy papers and strategic plans, but a lived reality. Here in Finland, internationalization wasn't just an aim; it was an inherent part of the

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academic structure, influencing research and teaching methods, technologies used, and values upheld (Jogunola & Varis, 2018; Haapakorpi & Saarinen, 2014; Dervin, 2015). It was a transformative force, shaping our experiences as Pakistani students in a Finnish institution determining influence over the ways international students relate to 'western knowledge'.

As we shared our narratives, the coffee shop became a sanctuary of understanding and connection. With light-hearted humor, my friend likened research hurdles to a 'red dupatta' of a bride entangled in thorny bushes, symbolizing the shift from hopeful anticipation to navigating through the uncertainties of our academic journey in Finland. Our stories, weaved together in this welcoming coffee space, not only bridged the gap between cultures but also offered invaluable insights into our own experiences in Finland. Through narrative exploration, we uncovered the intricate interplay between our personal encounters and the University of Jyväskylä's (JYU) internationalization efforts. This journey inevitably led us to explore the following question:

RQ: What challenges have we encountered as Pakistani doctoral researchers in Finland, and how do these experiences reflect the University of Jyväskylä's internationalization policies and practices?

It is important to mention here that we weave our personal story into a broader cultural and institutional context, so these research questions are an attempt to frame our experiences within the larger story of the JYU's internationalization efforts. These questions allow us to explore personal challenges, adaptations, and insights, connecting these experiences to larger themes of education, culture, migration, and internationalization (Guo & Guo, 2017; Volet & Jones, 2012). As we tread this path of exploration, our personal narratives become crucial to understanding the complexity of academic internationalization. More importantly, our story is more than just an account of two Pakistani doctoral researchers studying in Finland; it's an examination of internationalization in higher education especially from University of Jyväskylä's perspective, told through our lived experiences. This study is significant as it delves into the experiences of two doctoral researchers from the Global South at the JYU, trying to understand the notion of *internationalization of higher education*. Moving beyond policy dialogue, this article provides an analysis of our journeys in distinct academic landscapes, encompassing pedagogical strategies, curricula, and linguistic proficiency requirements. In its exploration of 'academic preparedness', the study emphasizes the collision of academic cultures at Global North institutions, an often-overlooked aspect in mainstream internationalization debates, advocating for a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by students during their transition. Furthermore, it advocates for reform of internationalization strategies, incorporating students' experiences into policymaking to foster a versatile, inclusive, and adaptive academic environment.

Conceptualization the study: a decolonial perspective

In reimagining the educational landscape through the prisms of Pakistani doctoral students in Finland, we traverse Mignolo's (2009) critical terrain of decolonial theory, which identifies the West's monopolization of epistemic authority and the relegation of 'other' knowledges to the periphery. This theory becomes crucial as we explore how students from the Global South experience and negotiate the Eurocentric academic setting they are immersed in. By drawing from Mignolo (2009, 2013), we delve into how educational internationalization might perpetuate colonial legacies rather than fostering a genuine integration of global intellectual diversities. Mignolo inspires us to challenge and reconfigure the very frameworks of knowledge production, suggesting that the task is not only to acknowledge the diversity but to fundamentally shift the epistemic foundations from which global education operates. As Gordon (2020) notes, this endeavour requires imaginative political work that sets forth a new humanity, one that breaks radically with existing colonial structures. This aligns with our critique of the international education system, advocating for an academic revolution that honours and integrates the multiple ways of knowing brought forth by these students. Our inquiry, deeply personal and shaped by political urgency, aims to not only critique but actively participate in the creation of an academic world where all forms of knowledge are respected and valued. We argue for an educational reform that embraces the decolonial option, turning away from Eurocentric epistemologies and towards a more inclusive and diversified understanding. This approach not only challenges the existing hierarchies within

academia but also seeks to dismantle them, proposing a new way forward that is inclusive of the epistemic contributions from all corners of the globe. The decolonial option is not simply an academic exercise but a necessary shift to address the colonial continuities embedded within the internationalization of education. By integrating these perspectives, we confront the complexities of implementing a truly global educational framework that does not merely replicate but actively dismantles the colonial matrices of power that have long dictated who is considered a knower and what is considered valid knowledge (Mignolo, 2013).

Why autoethnography?

In this study, the choice to use autoethnography transcends a mere methodological preference; it embodies a decolonial act, aligning with Mignolo's (2009) call for epistemic disobedience and the deconstruction of conventional scholarly narratives. Autoethnography enables us to delve into the intricacies of personal experiences, thereby weaving these into the broader fabric of cultural and social contexts. This approach disrupts the traditional paradigms of research that often marginalize subjective voices (Bochner, 2017; Ellis et al., 2011). By intertwining our personal narratives with empirical analysis, autoethnography provides an intimate lens through which we scrutinize the phenomena of social and academic life, reflecting the intricate interplay of the personal, institutional, and cultural dimensions of internationalization (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Further, our engagement with autoethnography serves to humanize and contextualize abstract concepts such as 'internationalization of higher education', transforming impersonal academic discourse into relatable, lived experiences (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). It facilitates a critical interrogation of internationalization from our lived perspectives as Pakistani doctoral students in Finland, thus bridging the gap between personal narratives and institutional practices. This method fosters a deeper understanding of the complexities of internationalization and advocates for a shift toward more participatory, student-centered models, particularly within the academic setting of JYU. By integrating personal stories into academic research, we do not merely add qualitative depth to our findings; we challenge and potentially transform the prevailing structures of knowledge production in higher education. This aligns with the decolonial imperative to reconfigure the epistemic foundations of knowledge, which Mignolo (2013) identifies as essential for dismantling the colonial matrix of power. Autoethnography empowers us to contribute actively to policy-making and to engage critically in the broader debates on internationalization strategies, highlighting the significance of personalized perspectives and contextual richness in shaping academic discourse. Thus, autoethnography not only enriches our academic inquiry but also acts as a form of resistance against the hegemonic epistemologies that have historically dominated and shaped the field of higher education. It is a method that insists on the validity and necessity of embedding the personal within the academic, urging a reconsideration of how knowledge is generated and valued in educational contexts.

JYU's internationalization policy: balancing finnish and inclusion

At JYU, the dual strands of '*Internationalization at Home*' and '*Internationalization Abroad*' frame a language policy that is deeply embedded in both the institutional strategy and daily academic life. '*Internationalization at Home*' enriches the local educational landscape by infusing global perspectives into the curriculum, a move that aligns with Finland's commitment to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). This approach not only broadens the academic horizon but also prepares students to thrive in diverse cultural settings, fostering a campus culture that values global citizenship alongside national identity. Conversely, '*Internationalization Abroad*' extends JYU's academic reach through student exchanges and international collaborations, predominantly conducted in English (Jogunola & Varis, 2018). This external focus supports JYU's global standing and offers students invaluable international exposure. However, the prominence of English as the academic lingua franca raises questions about the balance between global engagement and the preservation of linguistic diversity, particularly the status of Finnish within the university setting (Saarinen, 2012).

Significantly, at JYU, courses delivered in both Finnish and English seemingly demonstrate the university's dedication to an inclusive academic environment for all students—local and international. This

dual-language approach is anchored by policies that not only promote but insist on strong Finnish usage through enhanced pedagogical strategies. While such policies apparently aim to balance Finnish and English to foster a globally connected community, there is a pronounced emphasis on Finnish. This emphasis can be interpreted as an implicit prioritization of Finnish, potentially at odds with the declared goal of internationalization. The policy also mandates that educators develop a strong communicative competence across both native and additional languages, which is crucial for navigating the complexities of a multilingual educational environment. However, the pronounced focus on Finnish, especially in higher academic levels, suggests a nuanced divergence from the university's international aspirations. This focus on Finnish not only highlights the university's commitment to its linguistic heritage but also highlights a potential contradiction in its internationalization efforts. While aiming to project a multicultural stance, the university's practices in language use inadvertently favor Finnish, thus complicating its international and multilingual objectives. This scenario creates a tension within the policy framework, suggesting that the university's strategy to use its multicultural policy for internationalization might not fully align with its operational emphasis on Finnish, thus presenting a critical area for re-evaluation to truly embrace both local identity and global inclusivity.

Incorporating perspectives from Darling (2022), language policies at JYU are not just administrative tools but reflections of deeper language ideologies that prioritize certain languages over others. The experience of international students and faculty suggests a nuanced reality where language policies intersect with daily academic and social interactions, impacting everything from classroom learning to administrative communications. The doctoral program at JYU exemplifies this interplay between policy and practice. Doctoral students must navigate a landscape where proficiency in English is both a formal requirement and a practical necessity for engaging with the global research community. Simultaneously, the university also mandates a strong command of Finnish, not just as a cultural imperative but as an academic necessity. This dual requirement reflects JYU's broader commitment to a bilingual educational environment, even as it underscores the complex dynamics of language use within its doctoral programs. This scenario not only showcases JYU's linguistic framework but also highlights the challenges of maintaining a balanced bilingual policy that supports both Finnish and international students effectively within the doctoral community.

Internationalization in Finnish higher education: in a nutshell

The internationalization of Finnish higher education, encapsulated in the Ministry of Education and Culture's 'Strategy for the Internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions in Finland 2009–2015', aligns with broader European educational reforms post-EU accession, such as the Bologna Process and Lisbon and Modernization Agendas (Ahola & Mesikämnen, 2003). This strategic shift, critically analyzed by Välimaa and Weimer (2014), marks a move from sending Finnish students abroad to attracting international students, raising concerns about financial sustainability (Weimer, 2013). This tension resonates with Knight's (2007) framework but is complicated by socio-economic and cultural challenges, notably in integrating international graduates into the Finnish labour market (Sama, 2018) and the linguistic barriers evident in the Finnish society (Saarinen, 2012). The introduction of tuition fees for non-EU students (Välimaa & Weimer, 2014) signifies a critical policy shift, potentially deterring international students and exemplifying the tension between maintaining an open, internationalized educational environment and financial viability. Marttinen (2011) and Dervin and Machart (2016) offer a nuanced critique of this internationalization, considering the benefits and challenges to Finland's linguistic and cultural framework. The divergence between policy initiatives and institutional norms (Carvalho et al., 2021) further indicates that successful implementation hinges on navigating institutional cultures and norms. Nokkala (2007) provides historical context, emphasizing the political-economic motives in higher education reforms. Furthermore, Vellamo et al. (2022) and Aarrevaara et al. (2022) call for differentiated strategies in Finnish higher education internationalization, recognizing the varied needs across educational sectors. In conclusion, the literature on Finnish higher education internationalization reveals a complex progression from policy formation to implementation challenges, underscoring the necessity for a critically engaged, adaptable, and institution-specific approach. It highlights the importance of aligning national aspirations

with educational practices, financial constraints, and cultural integration, informed by both historical understanding and contemporary challenges.

Given this context, this inquiry is crucial in offering a counter-narrative to the existing literature, which often marginalizes the complex challenges non-Western students face in the Finnish academic landscape (Helakorpi et al., 2023). By centering on this demographic, our research contributes a nuanced perspective to 'internationalization at home', advocating for inclusivity and a critical re-evaluation of Eurocentric biases in higher education internationalization discourse. Simultaneously, our study examines the University of Jyväskylä's 'Internationalization at Home' and 'Abroad' strategies (Jogunola & Varis, 2018), critically examining their efficacy in addressing the diverse experiences of students from the Global South. This approach highlights significant gaps in current policy-focused discourses (Ahola & Mesikämnen, 2003; Weimer, 2013), suggesting that these strategies may not adequately reflect the complex realities of international students. Our research calls for JYU to adopt a more pluralistic approach to internationalization, one that is inclusive, participatory, and nuanced, and rooted in the unique experiences of students (Knight, 2007). This reframing aims not only to represent the diverse essence of internationalization but also to challenge and enrich the conventional understanding of academic preparedness and cultural integration within the internationalization discourse.

Data collection

In this autoethnographic research, the selection of two primary data collection methods, namely short stories and journal writing, was a natural choice. These methods proved to be instrumental in capturing our lived experiences as Pakistani students in Finland and exploring the intricate web of cultural representations and identities that shape our academic journey. For me, as an introspective researcher with introverted tendencies, *journaling* provided a natural and instinctive avenue for self-reflection and introspection (Rudrum et al., 2022). Through documentation of daily experiences, emotions, and thoughts during my doctoral studies in Finland, I described my academic journey as a Pakistani student abroad. More significantly, journal writing enabled me to critically analyse my responses and emotional reactions to various academic and cultural situations. This act of journaling fostered self-awareness, empowering me to grasp the complexities of my cultural identity and how it intertwined with the challenges faced in the foreign academic environment. The intimate documentation of academic progress and personal reflections in the journal contributed to a cohesive and comprehensive narrative, shedding light on the evolution of her perspectives throughout the doctoral studies. On the other hand, the integration of **short story** writing as a data collection method for *Gul (my friend)* held paramount significance in this autoethnographic research (Luitel & Dahal, 2021). Drawing from her passion for literature, particularly Urdu novels, and short stories, she expressed her voice and shared her experiences as a Pakistani student in Finland through the creative and narrative-driven approach of short stories. This literary medium allowed her to articulate her reflections and encounters within the foreign academic environment, leading to a deeper understanding of the intricate cultural dynamics at play. Through the art of storytelling, she critically examined her encounters, challenges, and achievements within the Finnish academic landscape, thereby offering a unique and engaging perspective. The richness and expressiveness inherent in short story writing enabled her to interweave personal narratives with broader cultural and social meanings, creating a compelling exploration of her academic journey. Thus, the utilization of journal writing for me and short story writing for my friend in this autoethnographic research justified their selection as data collection methods. These data collection tools not only provided valuable and intimate insights into our lived experiences as Pakistani students studying abroad in Finland but also facilitated a nuanced understanding of the cultural representations and identities entwined within our academic journey. These data collection methods allowed us to realistically convey our experiences while critically analyzing the intricacies and challenges of navigating academic life in a foreign land. The congruence between these data collection methods and the ethos of autoethnographic research further strengthened the research endeavour, facilitating a comprehensive and insightful exploration of our academic sojourns.

Analytical framework

In our autoethnographic study, we employ Riessman's (2011) narrative analysis, a method well-suited for delving into the meanings and structures within our personal narratives. This approach, as highlighted by Christopher (2017), allows for a thorough examination of how experiences are framed and organized, revealing the underlying propositions that provide coherence to our storytelling. We integrate both structural and thematic analysis (Rodriguez, 2016; Figgou & Pavlopoulos, 2015), examining the composition of stories and their overarching themes, thus enriching our exploration of Pakistani students' experiences in Finland. Riessman's (2011) methodology is particularly apt for our journal writings and short stories, which are repositories of intimate reflections and insights. Through narrative analysis, we unravel the complexities of these narratives, gaining a deeper understanding of the emotions, cultural perspectives, and nuances of our academic journey. The emphasis on transcribing and close textual analysis (Riessman, 2011) enables us to capture the subtleties of language and storytelling, thus conveying the emotional depth of our experiences.

Additionally, the integration of autoethnography aligns with Riessman's approach (Freeman, 2015), forging a link between our personal experiences and the broader cultural and institutional contexts of higher education internationalization. This method goes beyond surface-level descriptions, allowing us to unearth the underlying themes and implications of our experiences and providing a humanized and contextualized perspective on the concept of 'internationalization of higher education'. In summary, Riessman's (2011) narrative analysis framework emerges as a compelling and effective method for our study, enabling us to uncover profound insights into the experiences and challenges of Pakistani students in Finland. By focusing on the structure, content, and deeper meanings within our narratives, this approach enriches our understanding of academic internationalization from our unique perspectives.

Researcher's positionality

In this autoethnographic exploration, we grapple with our dual identity as both observers and subjects, which profoundly shapes our research stance (Kamlongera, 2023; Rowlands, 2022). Initially, as we integrated into our respective departments, our understanding of internationalization was embryonic, unmarked by critical questioning because we had not fully grasped its implications. Over time, our critiques and understanding deepened, shaped by our direct experiences within the academic environment. This duality compels us to balance personal vulnerability with a rigorous analytical lens. While mindful to shield our emotional well-being, we navigate the delicate task of managing the personal and the empirical without compromising the depth of self-disclosure necessary for genuine introspection. To maintain focus on the broader impact of policies rather than being swayed by specific personal experiences, we employed rigorous reflexivity, which demands continuous self-examination and awareness of our influence on the research, and peer debriefing, which brings external critiques into our interpretative process (Rowlands, 2022). These methods are vital in acknowledging and mitigating our biases, thus bolstering the authenticity and credibility of our findings. Therefore, our involvement in this study extends beyond participation—it demands a conscious commitment to maintaining an equilibrium between insightful personal reflection and scholarly integrity. This balance is crucial not just for preserving the integrity of our study, but for offering a nuanced critique of internationalization within academic contexts.

Data analysis

The analysis in our study is meticulously organized into two primary sections, each encompassing various categories that emerged from recurring themes in the data, as depicted in Table 1. These themes, while interrelated and occasionally overlapping, provide distinct insights into different facets of our experience.

To arrive at these categories and ensure their reliability and credibility, we employed a rigorous, iterative process. This involved an initial comprehensive review of the data for preliminary theme identification, followed by a constant comparison method to refine these themes. The process of triangulation

Table 1. Themes in the data.

Emotional & Psychological challenges	Academic challenges
White Supremacy: A Relic of the Past or an Ongoing Struggle?	What are the Research Expectations?
English Proficiency: Is There Such a Thing as 'Good' Enough?	Are Academic/Research Courses Tailored to Empower You?

was used to cross-verify themes with different data sources, enhancing their validity. Additionally, peer debriefing with independent reviewers was conducted to challenge and refine our findings, further bolstering the credibility of our thematic framework. The first section of our analysis delves into the emotional and psychological aspects of our academic journey, offering in-depth explorations of our personal experiences and reflections. The second section critically assesses the academic challenges encountered at the University of Jyväskylä, shedding light on the complexities and nuances of the internationalization process in higher education. This structured approach in organizing our analysis allows for a systematic exploration of our perspectives and narratives.

Emotional and psychological challenges

This section critically examines the emotional and psychological challenges we faced during our academic journey at the University of Jyväskylä, heavily influenced by our backgrounds in Pakistan and the entrenched perceptions stemming from our colonial legacy, particularly in interactions with 'white people.' It also contrasts the educational systems of Pakistan and Finland, exploring the disparities that shape our 'space of possibles' (Bourdieu, 1996b). Our exploration of these themes seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges brought by internationalization and its effects on personal and academic trajectories.

White supremacy: a relic of the past or an ongoing struggle?

Excerpt 1

I remember, when for the first time, I arrived here in Jyväskylä (with my brother who was especially appointed by my mother to make sure that I reach the destination safely), I was standing at the train station, waiting for my brother, who had gone to get my apartment keys, at that moment, I realized what a huge leap I had taken and looking around all these white people, whom I had never seen so closely in my life, the first thought that hit me was 'what am I doing here?'...I also remember, my first meeting with my supervisor when I was sitting in the JYU lobby and millions of things were running in my head especially, how will I communicate with her? do these white people speak the same kind of English that is taught in Pakistan? what if my knowledge that I have attained through crippled Pakistani educational system enough to operate here? what if my white supervisor doesn't approve me or my work or how I study? all of these questions engulfed my mind and all I remember was that I was in utter fear.

Reflecting on my narratives within the broader context of colonialism, as explored by scholars like Fanon (2016) and Mignolo (2009), reveals the chilling depth to which the past shapes internal struggles. My initial disorientation in Jyväskylä wasn't just cultural shock; it was a jarring collision with the internalized inferiority forged through years of colonization's subtle and overt conditioning (Quijano, 2007). The persistent complexes, the self-doubt, aren't mere newcomer nerves but enduring psychological wounds from colonial rule. This conditioning manifests most cruelly in how I viewed my own language and education. The internalized questions – 'Will my English be good enough? Is my Pakistani education even worthwhile?' – exemplify ingrained colonial hierarchies (Adefila et al., 2022; Bhambra et al., 2018). The phrase 'crippled Pakistani educational system' reflects an internalized belief in a fundamental brokenness within me. Western epistemologies, enshrined as the 'right' way to know, become the yardstick against which everything else is measured – and fails (Mignolo, 2013). This self-criticism is steeped in the coloniality of knowledge (Quijano, 2007). The stark realization of being surrounded by 'all these white people' marks a turning point. It's a shift from abstract to concrete; from the prior academic life where whiteness was theoretical to the visceral experience of being the visible minority. This forced confrontation is 'border thinking' at its most unsettling (Mignolo, 2009), as I suddenly found myself on the wrong side of boundaries I never consciously knew were there. The mental pandemonium of 'millions of things running in my head' illustrates more than newcomer jitters. It's the shattering of a fragile, colonized

identity. Every doubt about my language, knowledge, and insecurity erupted while standing at the train station. The physical relocation became the catalyst for exposing the unstable intellectual and emotional foundation I had been unconsciously standing upon. This struggle, I now realize, doesn't signify a personal failing but demonstrates the long reach and pernicious nature of colonialism's legacy.

Similarly, my friend's narrative (see excerpt 2) lays bare the insidious power dynamics within academia, mirroring the oppressive structures critiqued by scholars like Motta (2018) and Osler (2016).

Excerpt 2

In my journey through academia, I found myself confronting a deep-seated fear of my ex-supervisor back in Pakistan. Her behaviour exhibited an unsettling duality – friendly and amicable in the presence of others but adopting a more bureaucratic and rigid attitude when we were alone. I can still vividly recall instances when she would explicitly ask me to open her office door, leaving me feeling uneasy and apprehensive. Each encounter with her left me desperately searching for ways to gain her approval, yet her stern countenance often caused me to blank out and forget all I had prepared. As I stepped out of her room, I couldn't help but wonder how I could earn her appreciation for my work. The constant struggle to meet her expectations haunted me, generating an overwhelming sense of fear. However, my academic journey took a momentous turn when I arrived in Finland and had my first encounter with my current supervisor in the corridors of JYU. Timidly introducing myself, I softly uttered, 'You are my supervisor', and immediately sensed heightened attentiveness from my new mentor. The initial meeting was nerve-wracking as thoughts raced through my mind, doubting my own abilities and knowledge in an academic environment dominated by individuals of a different cultural background. The sheer intensity of fear during that meeting rendered me unable to articulate my thoughts and concerns. It felt as if I knew nothing about my research or how to navigate this academic world populated by 'all white' individuals.

Reflecting on Gul's experiences through the lens of colonialism reveals the subtle power dynamics at play. Her ex-supervisor's duality – affable publicly, rigid privately – mirrors how institutions perpetuate colonial power structures, masking a system where knowledge and validation flow from a dominant source within a facade of civility. Her supervisor's act of expecting her to open her office door, within this colonial context, symbolizes imposed authority (Quijano, 2007). This power dynamic deeply impacted her, as her relentless pursuit of approval and paralyzing 'blank out' moments expose the 'epistemic violence' of coloniality (Mignolo, 2009). This violence warps the mind, instilling fear and self-doubt that hinder authentic critical thinking. The experience parallels Freire's (2018) 'banking method' of education, where students become passive recipients, regurgitating knowledge instead of actively engaging with it. Her ex-supervisor's expectation to 'opening the door' symbolizes historical echoes where students internalize the need for permission to be heard, replicating a power-residing relationship with the authority figure. This highlights the insidious nature of colonialism's legacy, extending beyond direct oppression to shape understandings of authority, knowledge, and intellectual worth. Arriving in Finland brought a glimmer of hope. The new supervisor's 'heightened attentiveness' signals openness to 'border thinking' – recognizing differing ways of knowing and learning (Mignolo, 2009). Yet, the trauma of colonial conditioning lingers. Doubting her abilities and feeling she knew 'nothing about research' echo the coloniality of knowledge, haunting those conditioned to view their perspectives as inferior in Western-centric systems (Mignolo, 2013). The reference to 'all white individuals' exposes a profound alienation, reminding us that academic spaces often remain moulded around Western norms. These experiences are not isolated incidents but point to the dangers of what Moosavi (2020) critiques as mere 'intellectual decolonization.' This analysis highlights the ongoing struggle against colonial legacies in academia and the need for genuine decolonization efforts.

English proficiency: is there such a thing as 'good' enough?

Another aspect that both of us, as doctoral researchers in Finland, experienced and engaged in during our coffee meetups was the prominence of the English language. We often pondered the question: 'How much English is considered proficient?' The ease with which we communicate our academic ideas in our mother tongue sparked discussions on the role of language in academia. It seems that communicating in our mother tongue enhances our ability to support each other in our respective academic journeys. These dynamic highlights the significant challenges we faced concerning English language proficiency.

Excerpt 3

For me, as soon as I moved in Finland, I felt my English proficiency is insufficient and that I will never be able to communicate anything in English. I remember, my meetings with my supervisors when I use to be completely at loss of words even when I knew the discussion was about. At times, I used to feel that English vocabulary is somewhere stuck in my throat and every single sentence that I utter, maybe wrong or my supervisors won't understand anything I say. I always had to fight between maintaining my focus on the content (subject of discussion) and English. Sitting in front of an 'angraiz' (white skinned people) speaking English was at times nerve racking especially in the start of my doctoral studies. Then I also used to think that if I learn Finnish maybe it will become easier for me to communicate my ideas in a Finnish working environment.

My struggle with English 'sufficiency' (see Excerpt 3) reveals the enduring psychological weight of coloniality, mirroring the linguistic alienation Fanon (2016) exposed. It isn't just about fluency, but a system where the colonizer's language becomes the unfair benchmark by which intellectual worth is judged. This echoes Quijano's (2007) 'coloniality of knowledge' – the subtle yet pervasive ways colonial power structures are embedded within academia. My paralysis in front of supervisors isn't a personal failing, but a symptom of a system that silences those who don't conform to its deeply ingrained hierarchies. The decision to potentially learn Finnish highlights the unequal terrain non-native English speakers navigate. This adaptive move aligns with Mignolo's (2013) focus on the geopolitics of knowledge. It's a desperate attempt to 'fit in', exposing the implicit requirement to conform to Western linguistic expectations. Yet, learning Finnish, as Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) might argue, doesn't truly dismantle the hierarchy. True decolonization demands that we question the very standards by which knowledge is deemed legitimate. The metaphor of English vocabulary 'stuck in my throat' underscores the physical toll of linguistic expectations. It's not just nerves, but internalized oppression – the colonizer's voice literally choking my own. Hooks (1994) theorizes how language is a tool of power. When linguistic 'fluency' in the colonizer's tongue is imposed, full expression of intellect and experience becomes nearly impossible. This reflects the silencing effects of what Motta (2018) calls the 'violent monologue' of colonialism that denies the 'knowing-being' of those deemed 'Other.' Likewise, the use of 'angraiz' (a colloquial term for white-skinned people) subverts the illusion of a neutral, objective academic space. It exposes how race remains entwined with perceived intellectual authority, echoing the 'white occupation' of knowledge that Leonardo critiques (Arday & Mirza, 2018). This stark term acknowledges the reality that decolonization isn't just about diversifying faces in academia; it demands confronting colonialism's enduring power, dismantling the whiteness that remains implicitly equated with knowledge production.

Excerpt 4

Moie (stupid) English was not ours, and it didn't fit nicely into my mind. Although I have studied English since my kindergarten, it always felt foreign and artificial to me. Every single thought instantaneously comes in our mother language, so how can we believe that people like us (referring to Pakistanis in general), with double standards, mostly use White-skinned people's language (English) to impress others and achieve higher status, can be proficient in English especially in the academic research context? The irony is that even the feelings and 'kambakht' nightmares come in our own mother language. How can my research in my local context come in an artificial language (English)? This is what I started feeling towards the end of my doctoral studies.

The lament that 'Moie (stupid) English was not ours' by Gul (see Excerpt 4) lays bare the deep-seated alienation that persists within seemingly neutral academic spaces. This isn't simply a matter of proficiency; it's a potent reminder of the enduring legacy of colonialism, where the colonizer's language disrupts the natural flow of thought (Fanon, 2016). Despite years of study, English can feel 'foreign and artificial', illustrating Quijano's (2007) 'coloniality of knowledge.' Academic proficiency in English becomes a marker of 'higher status', showing how colonialism continues to shape the valuation of knowledge within academia. Her frustration with 'people like us' using English 'to impress others' highlights a critical tension within decolonization efforts. While the dominance of English is undeniable, Mignolo (2009) reminds us that navigating these power structures can be a strategic survival tactic. The question isn't simply about rejecting English, but about dismantling the systems that privilege it. The sentence, 'even the feelings and 'kambakht' (unfateful/unfortunate) nightmares come in our mother language', cuts to the heart of the issue. It's not just about academic jargon; it's about raw, unfiltered moments of pain

and emotion that can't be neatly expressed in the colonizer's language. Forcing English on these experiences misses the essence and emotional truth. This profound limitation of relying solely on English for academic research is why scholars like Smith (2021) advocate centering indigenous knowledge systems. Our lived experiences are woven from our language, cultural expressions, and unique ways of understanding the world. Western academia, however, often imposes its rigid framework on knowledge production, relying heavily on English as the language of legitimacy, effectively silencing voices and experiences expressed through other languages and cultural forms. The frustration with 'research in my local context' being done in an 'artificial language' resonates deeply. It highlights the core injustice of adhering to a single, dominant way of knowing, echoing what Mignolo (2009, 2013) calls the 'geopolitics of knowledge.' This framework assumes the universality and superiority of Western epistemologies, making them the standard by which all others are measured and often discarded. Within this colonial structure, language becomes deeply political. Forcing the complexities of local contexts into English serves not just as a communication tool but as a way to maintain this hierarchy. It suggests that 'real' research and 'true' knowledge can only be expressed within the linguistic and conceptual confines imposed by the colonizer. This resonates with Tuck and Yang (2021) critique that decolonization isn't about merely including diverse perspectives or voices. The consequences for education are far-reaching. Students who don't see themselves or their communities reflected in what is deemed 'legitimate' knowledge may become disengaged, internalizing a sense of inferiority (Quijano, 2007). It reinforces what Hooks (1994) identifies as the way language can be wielded as a colonizing tool, limiting how students can express their experiences and intellectual potential. Thus, the emphasis on English proficiency becomes a distraction from the real issue.

Academic challenges

In our experience at the University of Jyväskylä, a significant academic challenge was navigating the uncertainty of our roles and the expectations of our supervisors. As doctoral students, we were initially unprepared for the specific academic demands, leading to a communication gap that impeded our progress. This lack of clarity fostered ambiguity and apprehension, impacting our academic performance, and creating feelings of isolation.

Excerpt 5

I was fortunate in a way that I had the best supervisors at JYU especially when I compare them with the supervisor. In Pakistan, I really suffered when it came to supervision. I remember, sitting in my supervisor's office for hours just for her to have a look at (not even read) my thesis to that I know if I am moving in the right direction. When I moved to JYU, I was terrified if I was going to go through the same thing again and prayed that I find a compassionate person to guide me which I was fortunate to find. However, at times, I couldn't understand completely what was expected of me. I thought maybe its lack of my language skills, or there is something wrong with my understanding but in retrospect I now realize that the academic expectations were not clearly pointed out. I do acknowledge that people in the North have no firsthand experience of how educational system works in the South and vice versa.

My contrasting experiences with supervision in Pakistan and JYU expose a truth far more critical than a simple North-South divide. They reveal the insidious persistence of a colonial mindset within Pakistani universities themselves. The suffering I endured with my Pakistani supervisor wasn't just about individual neglect. It reflects a 'master-slave' colonial mentality where my intellectual work held little value. This echoes the way I could easily be dismissed as a colonized subject within the British Empire, my voice and knowledge deemed irrelevant. It's a painful reminder of how the legacy of Macaulay's (1835) 'Minute' lingers, privileging Western knowledge systems and erasing local expertise. The way I encountered my Pakistani supervisor – an echo of domineering white officials from the colonial era – isn't just a historical analogy. It's a symptom of a deeper illness within Pakistani education. Though the British may have physically departed 76 years ago, their educational blueprint continues to cast a long shadow. Pakistani universities, with their rigid hierarchies and emphasis on rote memorization, often mirror these colonial power structures. Even within JYU's positive and collaborative environment, my initial anxieties about unclear expectations reveal a different challenge. The self-doubt I felt – wondering if my language skills or understanding were to blame – highlights a gap created by the lingering legacy of colonialism.

Scholars from Pakistan, shaped by a system that often emphasizes obedience and rote learning (Ansari et al., 2024), can face disorientation when entering a more student-centered Western model (Van Nguyen, 2022). It wasn't just about my personal shortcomings, but the different assumptions about learning that each system holds. This highlights the limits of 'intellectual decolonization' (Moosavi, 2020). True decolonization isn't just about kind supervisors; it's about dismantling power dynamics that shape how universities operate and expectations are communicated. While JYU might prioritize individual autonomy, the emphasis on self-reliance can obscure the invisible barriers for those coming from educational systems like Pakistan's (Ansari et al., 2024). This 'null curriculum' – what is unspoken but expected within an educational context (Le Grange, 2016) – creates confusion for people like us raised in more hierarchical learning environments.

Excerpt 6

My relationship with my supervisors was positive, and our research meetings took place in a pleasant and friendly environment. However, the expectations regarding our roles were not clearly communicated. My supervisor never provided definitive guidance that would help me determine my research direction. In contrast, when I compare my JYU supervisor to my previous supervisor in Pakistan, I noticed a difference in our Pakistani educational system, where supervisors tend to give more explicit directions on how to proceed with research. In JYU, such explicit guidance seemed to be lacking. The Finnish education system operates under the principle of 'we trust you', which is commendable, but it may overlook the need for 'accountability' and 'checks' to ensure that students like us can navigate our academic path effectively.

Likewise, Gul's experiences at JYU illustrate (see Excerpt 6) how the 'we trust you' philosophy, meant to be empowering, can leave those steeped in more hierarchical systems feeling lost. While 'pleasant research meetings' sound ideal, the lack of clear expectations reveals a different kind of power imbalance. This echoes how neo-liberal higher education spaces perpetuate the 'logics and rationalities of coloniality', subtly imposing a Western ideal of 'knowing-being' by denying guidance to those who need it (Motta, 2018). It's not about JYU being bad, but about assumptions hidden within its system. They may proclaim autonomy, but this can silence and marginalize those not accustomed to navigating such ambiguity. The push for 'accountability' and 'checks' that Gul craved isn't about relinquishing self-direction; it's about dismantling the 'violent monologue' inherent in systems that uphold one standard while claiming neutrality (Motta, 2018). This situation underscores why 'simply diversifying the face of coercive power' won't fix things (Adébisi, 2023). It's about interrogating the 'entanglement between knowledge and power' – the way assumptions about what good scholarship is are themselves shaped by colonialism. JYU's system, for all its good intentions, exemplifies the limitations of 'intellectual decolonization' (Moosavi, 2020). True decolonization demands acknowledging how even seemingly progressive systems retain colonial power structures if they don't cater to the needs of diverse learners. It requires addressing those hidden expectations that create barriers for students from the Global South (Le Grange, 2016). Moreover, it's about confronting the 'white occupation of academic knowledge' (Leonardo in Arday & Mirza, 2018) – the unspoken assumption that everyone will intuit the rules of the game. This isn't about hand-holding; it's about respecting that different educational traditions have shaped students' understandings of their roles. In conclusion, her experience highlights the need for a balanced approach. It's not just about valuing autonomy, but about recognizing that transparent guidance is equally crucial in creating an inclusive academic environment. This kind of cultural sensitivity is vital if we truly hope to dismantle the legacy of colonial power dynamics within the ivory tower.

Are academic/research courses tailored to empower you?

In my research journey, contrasting academic supervision experiences between JYU and Pakistan have critically highlighted the divergences in educational paradigms. The transition from a Pakistani educational system, characterized by minimal guidance and a more authoritative approach, to JYU's more supportive and understanding environment marked a significant shift. This shift involved adapting to different academic expectations and coping with the lingering impact of previous experiences that were less involved and responsive (Ansari et al., 2024). Thus, stepping into JYU's academic landscape reveals a system (see excerpt 7) that often fails international students from the Global South.

Excerpt 7

One of the things, that I found difficult to cope especially academically was the fact that there were no clear-cut courses that could introduce me to what I was about to get myself into. I mean, JYU has courses, but from where I stand and see them, they all look random. its like you can take one course that's on 'abstract writing' and then some random course on 'open science' (a course which we have absolutely no idea about in Pakistan, I bet most of the university professors don't even know this concept, and in JYU, they expect us to understand by taking one course) ... these didn't mean anything substantial to me. Then there were courses that were JUST offered in Finnish. I mean, I thought there is 'fault in my stars'. I don't blame JYU for this, but I don't understand how do researchers like us, cope with this kind of situation? As a result, I was least interested in taking any courses. I took only the ones that were necessary to complete my degree.

A lack of 'clear-cut courses' introducing students from the Global South to the academic environment exposes a curriculum blind to our needs (Bhambra et al., 2018). JYU presents a seemingly diverse range of options such as 'abstract writing' and 'open science.' However, for students from universities where these concepts are entirely new, such courses function more as taunts than introductions (Gaio et al., 2023). JYU can't claim innocence here; the 'fault' lies not with individual students, but with a decolonization effort stuck in its infancy (Motta, 2018). JYU's 'random' course offerings epitomize the 'epistemic silences' that marginalize those from non-Western educational backgrounds (Gaio et al., 2023). The system speaks a different academic language, leaving international students like us adrift in a sea of unfamiliarity, like Alice lost in Wonderland (Bhambra et al., 2018). This is further exacerbated by courses offered solely in Finnish. This isn't a minor inconvenience; it's a glaring example of the 'null curriculum' at play (Le Grange, 2016). JYU assumes a baseline knowledge – the ability to navigate Finnish academia – that simply doesn't exist for many international students from the Global South. This perpetuates the 'violent monologue' inherent in neo-liberalized higher education, where Western knowledge reigns supreme (Motta, 2018). JYU might promote its international outlook, but its course structure speaks a different story, one that silences those who can't decipher the code (Leonardo in Arday & Mirza, 2018). The consequence? Disillusionment. Students with a thirst for knowledge become disengaged because the system offers no bridge to translate their existing academic experiences into the JYU context. This is a stark reminder that decolonization is more than optics; it's about dismantling the power structures embedded within seemingly neutral course offerings (Adébisi, 2023).

Excerpt 8

...now if I look at the other side, it seems that in one course (for doctoral students) of JYU they teach 'A' and in other course they seem to be teaching 'Z' which is not in any way connected with each other at least to me ... in short, JYU courses for us doctoral students, lack cohesion and comprehensiveness that could prepare students like us who come from countries like Pakistan where 'out-dated theories' are shoved down our throats and if you try to engage in any critical thinking, the teachers get personal and penalize you for supposedly 'thinking' better than them. So, we kind of feel stuck if what we have learnt in Pakistan is appropriate to at least start our PhD journey in universities such as JYU.

Equally, Gul's experience at JYU (see Excerpt 8) exposes a similar worrying trend: a curriculum that claims to be cutting edge but perpetuates a colonial mindset. Courses jump from 'A' to 'Z', lacking the 'cohesion and comprehensiveness' that would support a student from the Global South (Gaio et al., 2023). After escaping years of being force-fed 'outdated theories' and punished for 'thinking better' (a stark reminder of how the colonial mindset works in the Pakistani education system), she's thrown into a system that assumes a Western knowledge base. This resonates with the 'epistemic silences' scholars critique, where non-Western forms of knowledge are erased and devalued (Gaio et al., 2023). Her frustration is understandable. JYU seems trapped in the early stages of 'intellectual decolonization' (Moosavi, 2020). They offer diverse courses, but that alone doesn't dismantle the 'entanglement between knowledge and power' (Adébisi, 2023). The unspoken expectations and emphasis on a specific kind of critical thinking uphold the 'violent monologue' of colonialism (Motta, 2018). Instead of empowering her, JYU risks reproducing the same silencing she fought against back home. Her feeling of being 'stuck' highlights the insidious nature of exclusion in higher education. True decolonization demands more than just a diverse course catalogue. It's about challenging the very idea that there's a 'right' way to think (Santos, 2021). JYU needs to recognize the validity of her knowledge while offering clear guidance to bridge the gap between where she stands and JYU's expectations. This aligns with Ahmed-Landeryou

(2023) call for decolonial curriculum frameworks that not only teach diverse content but also provide meaningful support, empowering students like my friend to chart their own path through this seemingly confusing academic landscape. The disjointed curriculum risks creating a new kind of obstacle, one disguised as freedom. Without intentional effort to acknowledge the diverse knowledge systems students bring, JYU perpetuates a colonial model even within its well-intentioned attempts at inclusion. This highlights the limitations of performative changes within higher education; true decolonization demands deeper, more systemic transformation.

Discussion

Our experiences as Pakistani doctoral researchers in Finland expose a harsh truth that transcends individual journeys. This isn't about simple policy success or failure. Instead, our experiences reveal how colonialism's wounds, hierarchies, and power dynamics continue to shape academia, even within well-intentioned inclusion efforts. JYU's approach to internationalization highlights this: the pressures of linguistic conformity, the 'null curriculum', and the assumed Western academic model demonstrate a gap between benevolent policies and their real-world impact on diverse scholars. This reflects a key issue within internationalization efforts at many institutions, including JYU, where the focus on attracting international students often overlooks how existing systems perpetuate colonial power dynamics.

Drawing on decolonial theories such as those proposed by Mignolo (2009, 2013) and Quijano (2007), it becomes evident that JYU's seemingly inclusive internationalization policies mask the insidious ways colonialism's legacy persists. European colonialism, characterized by Western domination and exploitation, extended beyond territorial control to influence cultural, educational, and ideological domains globally (Lehning, 2013). Finland, often seen as a colonial victim, participated in colonial projects during the 19th century through scientific expeditions, missionary work, and economic activities, thus reinforcing colonial endeavors (Merivirta et al., 2022). This complicates the narrative of Finnish innocence in colonialism. Educational institutions like JYU are not isolated entities but products of these historical, social, and political contexts. JYU's adoption of Western pedagogical models reflects a 'civilizing mission' that aligns with colonial ideologies of cultural superiority (Merivirta et al., 2021). This mission, rooted in the belief in the inherent superiority of Western cultures and knowledge systems, aimed to 'enlighten' others by imposing these values. This form of 'gentle colonialism', characterized by subtler methods of control and influence (Lehtola, 2015), operates through cultural and educational impositions that appear benevolent but ultimately maintain power over the colonized (Doran, 2022; Lehtola, 2015). For instance, JYU's policies, which prioritize specific language skills, exemplify this ongoing coloniality by disadvantaging multilingual students and reinforcing a hierarchy within the educational space (Mustonen, 2021). The curriculum at JYU, heavily centered on Western epistemologies, marginalizes non-Western knowledge systems and perpetuates a colonial mindset. This is evident in the emphasis on Finnish and English, aligning with the historical imposition of the colonizer's language and values. The curriculum's focus on Western academic models and standards further excludes diverse epistemologies, as seen in the experiences of international students struggling with concepts unfamiliar in their home countries (Rastas, 2005).

Our study shows that the linguistic and epistemological disorientation we faced stems from trying to fit diverse knowledge systems into a Western and Finnish-centered framework. Learning Finnish isn't inherently negative, but its elevation can signal to international students, especially from the Global South, that belonging requires mastering another language, echoing the colonial mindset of adapting to dominant cultures (Mignolo, 2009). Policies are not neutral; they reflect deeper ideologies (Darling, 2022). JYU's insistence on Finnish fluency aims to preserve linguistic heritage but creates tension with its internationalization goals, pushing international researchers to master additional languages while their own intellectual traditions remain unrecognized. Similarly, the focus on English for doctoral research perpetuates the illusion that Global South knowledge must conform to Anglophone standards, dismissing alternative epistemologies as inferior (Mignolo, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2021). These issues, masked by the global admiration for Finnish educational excellence, highlight the need for culturally responsive teaching practices and robust support for multilingual learners. The persistent use of blackface and denial of systemic racism in Finnish academia further highlights the colonial ideologies

that continue to manifest (Doran, 2022). Scholars like Palmberg (2009) critique the Nordic rhetoric that condemns colonialism while perpetuating colonial practices within Nordic societies. This 'Nordic exceptionalism' allows Finland to position itself as a moral authority while overlooking its colonial complicity (Merivirta et al., 2022).

The gaze of the colonizer is felt acutely in both Finland and Pakistan, manifesting through the privileging of Western knowledge systems and the marginalization of our intellectual traditions. In Finland, this gaze materializes in the linguistic conformity expected of international students and the implicit superiority of Western epistemologies. In Pakistan, the colonial mindset persists through educational practices that devalue local knowledge in favor of Western paradigms. The rote learning system, inherited from colonial educational models, prioritizes memorization over critical engagement, echoing Macaulay's (1835) 'Minute on Indian Education' which advocated for the production of a class of intermediaries schooled in British ways of thinking. This colonial legacy has created an environment where Pakistani intellectual contributions are often seen as secondary to Western academic standards. This is evident in the way Pakistani scholars, upon entering Western academic institutions, are forced to navigate and conform to Western academic norms and expectations, often at the expense of their own cultural and intellectual heritage. The roles of colonizer and colonized in the academic context are deeply intertwined, manifesting in what I term 'microcolonial embodiment.' This concept highlights the subtle and embodied expressions of ongoing colonial influence. Here, dominance is maintained not only through seemingly neutral practices but also through microinvalidations – subtle, often unintentional, expressions of bias that infiltrate body language, interactions, and unspoken expectations. For instance, juxtaposed against the whiteness of Jyväskylä's train station (excerpt 1), a profound sense of alienation washed over me. Internalized colonial inferiority fueled questions about belonging and preparedness, highlighting microcolonial embodiment's power to create instant, personal otherness. Similarly, disjointed courses and language barriers (excerpt 7, 8) further expose this embodiment. Seemingly neutral systems, like course selection, become hurdles when dominated by Finnish fluency expectations. JYU's good intentions mask a system that perpetuates the very hierarchies it aims to dismantle.

While the promise of a globally connected education undeniably fueled our decision to migrate (seeking a more inclusive academic environment), JYU's approach exposes a harsh reality: internationalization policies themselves are not innocent. These seemingly progressive initiatives often perpetuate colonial dynamics, othering our bodies, beings, and knowledge. Our autoethnography, inspired by Mignolo's critical theory, advocates for curricula that decenter Western thought, language policies that celebrate multilingualism, and structured support for international students. Participatory policymaking and mandatory decolonial training for faculty are crucial to dismantling implicit biases and supporting diverse ways of knowing. Sharing these experiences thus highlights the ongoing decolonization struggle. We must go beyond condemning former colonizers and critically examine how colonial mindsets shape Pakistani education systems and practices. This empowers us to call for equitable systems that respect diverse knowledge forms and support scholars from all backgrounds. Decolonization, as Bhabra et al. (2018) argue, isn't about adding diverse voices to reading lists; it's a revolutionary project demanding a re-evaluation of what constitutes 'legitimate knowledge.' The fight for intellectual autonomy, as Spivak (2010, 2023) reminds us, is about the right to be heard on our own terms, free from Western-centric constraints.

Decolonial scholarship offers a way forward. JYU needs to move beyond inclusivity and actively dismantle internalized colonial power structures. This means creating genuinely open spaces where diverse knowledge systems are encouraged and respected, offering courses that explicitly decenter Western thought and explore Global South academic traditions. It may require rethinking doctoral program structures to offer different paths for students, balancing structured guidance and autonomy instead of a one-size-fits-all Western model. True inclusion isn't just about diverse faces but honouring the diverse ways of thinking they represent (Smith, 2021). Until these steps are taken, the academic environment at JYU and similar institutions will remain challenging for researchers from diverse backgrounds. This calls for critically re-evaluating internationalization policies to ensure they actively dismantle colonial legacies, not merely superficially embrace global diversity.

Conclusion

Our experiences as Pakistani doctoral researchers at JYU illuminate the contradictions within internationalization efforts. JYU's emphasis on bilingualism, while well-intentioned, risks marginalizing scholars like ourselves by prioritizing Finnish and perpetuating Western-centric epistemologies. This study exposes the urgent need for universities to move beyond performative inclusivity. True decolonization demands dismantling these hierarchies and fostering spaces that embrace the symphony of diverse knowledge systems. While our research focused on JYU, these challenges extend far beyond a single institution. It's a call for critical self-reflection across academia, urging a move from simply attracting international students to fostering a world where all knowledge traditions are valued, and scholars can flourish on their own terms.

More importantly, in our study, we connect our personal experiences as Pakistani doctoral researchers in Finland to larger themes of education, culture, migration, and internationalization within a decolonial framework. By juxtaposing Pakistan's rote learning system with Finland's student autonomy, we explored the colonial legacies embedded in educational practices in both contexts. Further, our use of autoethnography reveals how linguistic and epistemological conformity at JYU fosters alienation, embodying subtle colonial influences through 'microcolonial embodiment.' Similarly, we address the intersection of migration and colonial power dynamics, highlighting the disorientation faced in a predominantly white academic setting, representing a shift between diverse educational paradigms and cultural expectations. By grounding our narratives in these larger themes, our study highlights the persistence of colonial structures in academia and calls for a more inclusive, participatory, and nuanced approach to internationalization, rooted in the diverse experiences of students.

It's a bitter irony, isn't it? Here we are, critiquing the dominance of English within knowledge production, yet we ourselves are wielding it as our tool of expression. This reality is a stark reminder of the enduring power dynamics at play. Even as we debate for decolonization, the colonial legacy shapes the very language we use to be heard. But this doesn't weaken our message. In fact, it strengthens it. Our experiences become living proof of the coloniality of knowledge, highlighting the insidious ways these structures continue to shape academia. This is an ongoing debate, and future research should explore how universities can actively dismantle colonial legacies and co-create truly inclusive knowledge production frameworks. It's also a call for a broader conversation on what decolonized research and education truly looks like. Can we imagine alternative channels for disseminating knowledge, ones that celebrate multilingualism and diverse forms of scholarship? The debate for a more just and equitable academia starts with these critical questions.

Note

1. In South Asian cultures, red symbolises the colour of love, the bride who wears red is bold, passionate, committed, and full of desire (Das, 2020).

Disclosure statement

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Rauha Salam-Salmaoui holds a PhD in English Linguistics from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her doctoral dissertation, titled 'Constructing Gender Identities Multimodally: Young, middle-class Pakistanis on Facebook', investigates the ways in which young, middle-class Pakistani individuals utilize visual and linguistic resources to shape their gender identities in Facebook posts. Dr. Salam-Salmaoui's research focuses on various areas, including gender identities, Islam, representation of women in textbooks, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, feminism, and social and mainstream media. She is committed to exploring the intersections of language, gender, and identity, particularly in the context of Pakistan. Her work contributes to the field of research on gender and communication, shedding light on the complex ways individuals navigate and negotiate their identities in digital spaces.

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