

## Teaching comparative and international education (CIE) in UK universities: coverage, omissions and orientations

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## Teaching comparative and international education (CIE) in UK universities: coverage, omissions and orientations

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the teaching of comparative and international education (CIE) in undergraduate and master's programmes in 30 UK universities via bibliometric and content analysis of the handbooks of 55 CIE courses. Our analysis demonstrates great diversity in what is categorised as CIE, alongside some clear patterns and preoccupations evident across units, as reflected in the selection of materials, and geographical and thematic coverage. Findings suggest a 'UK-centric' orientation to CIE, marked by an emphasis on UK academic voices and references, and geographical foci which centre on the former colonial sphere of influence. Alongside this we identify three broad orientations to CIE teaching in the UK – 'positivist', 'socio-cultural', and 'critical' – and consider their nature and prevalence across different institutions and programmes.

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Comparative and international education; teaching in higher education; education studies; UK universities

## Introduction

Universities are central in shaping the next generation of researchers and educators within the field of comparative and international education (CIE). There have been periodic calls for empirical research on the nature of CIE teaching in universities (Tikly and Crossley 2001), and efforts to catalogue CIE provision worldwide (Altbach and Thye Jason Tan 1994; Manzon 2011). However, across this research, limited attention has been given to the actual content of teaching of CIE in UK institutions. A recent international review of CIE teaching (M. Li, Li, and Yuan 2024) included 10 articles, none of which captured UK provision. Several edited volumes have provided an overview of international CIE with wide geographic coverage, including Kubow and Blosser (2016) and C. Wolhuter et al. (2013), which explores CIE history and programming in brief chapters for 47 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America. Within that volume, O'Sullivan (2013) reports on the limited and often 'ad hoc' presence of comparative education in teacher education programmes in the UK and Ireland. Beyond that, a rare example of a study which engaged closely with the content of CIE provision was Schweisfurth's study of CIE teaching in the UK in the late 1990s, which examined course prospectuses from 91 education programmes and found that few

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included ‘discernible international comparative study’ (Schweisfurth, 1999, 91). There, interviews and documentary evidence from four chosen UK universities further demonstrated that while institutions had research centres for CIE-related collaboration, the field remained at the margins of undergraduate teaching, and its presence in postgraduate programmes was ‘professionally oriented’ (100). A common feature of previous studies has been a sense of decline and retreat of CIE teaching, at least within teacher education in the UK (Kubow and Blosser 2016; O’Sullivan 2013). However, fresh attention is warranted to CIE provision, especially given recent changes to the sector.

In the past decade, UK universities have undergone significant changes which are likely to have impacted the audience and content for CIE teaching. Since the 2008 global financial crash, universities have seen significant cuts to government funding, and increased reliance on student tuition and accommodation fees (Lewis and Bolton 2024) and ‘internationalisation’ through global marketing to attract international student populations (Warwick 2014). At the same time, universities have undergone expansion: by 2017, 50% of young people in the UK entered higher education (Montacute and Cullinane 2023). In line with this, undergraduate programmes in Education Studies have grown in recent years, creating new opportunities for the teaching of CIE (Burton and Bartlett 2006; Pulsford, Morris, and Purves 2023). At Bristol, for instance, the home institution for some authors of this study, a bachelor’s programme was introduced in 2017.

At the same time, there have been changes in *who* is accessing higher education in the UK: postgraduate programmes in particular are increasingly commodified, self-contained, and marketed to international students, expanding the national – but not always the socio-economic – diversity of programmes (Tomlinson and Watermeyer 2022; Zhang, Tan, and O’Halloran 2022). International student tuition fees now make up 23% of university income, increasing from just 5% in the 1990s, and, as of 2023/2024, there were three times as many full-time overseas students as home students in taught postgraduate courses (Bolton 2025). It’s not clear how, if at all, these changes in student population have filtered into CIE teaching.

Over the same period there has been significant debate around *what* is taught in UK institutions. Recent years have seen growing efforts to review the taught curriculum across all levels of education and disciplinary areas, and reflect on the ways in which curricular choices, the inclusion of texts, and the foregrounding of different perspectives can challenge wider structural inequalities in society (e.g. Eichhorn, Krishnan, and Tikly 2025; Morreira et al. 2020). Movements to decolonise curricula and to confront patriarchy, racism and other oppressive structures have characterised discussions about the nature of education and its role in reifying structural inequalities (Silova, Jeremy, and Euan 2020). This has been a time of self-reflection on the ways in which global power asymmetries and structures of coloniality, racism, patriarchy and other forms of domination have affected knowledge production in CIE (Shields and Paulson 2025; Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker 2020; Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017). However, academics are only one amongst multiple actors involved in CIE; policymakers and international agencies often undertake educational comparisons for more for directly practical purposes (Bray, Adamson, and Mason 2014). Within these spaces, there is more limited engagement with colonial power dynamics (e.g. Cameron et al. 2025; Gibbons and Otiaku-Boadu

2021). Positivist tools and approaches, with an emphasis on randomised control trials, league tables, and ‘transferable’ best practices dominate in the work of many large international organisations carrying out research and applied CIE programming and policy worldwide (e.g. X. Li and Auld 2020; Mason, Crossley, and Bond 2019; Samoff 2025). The research team for this article includes both applied CIE practitioners and academics, all of whom undertook at postgraduate studies in CIE as a prerequisite for their current work: with this shared foundation, we have often discussed the extent of alignment between workplace demands and university education, and the apparent disconnect between what is being taught and what is being practiced in applied CIE spaces.

In light of the factors outlined above, including changes to the funding and demographics of UK higher education, as well as changing expectations around the curriculum and practical applications of CIE, the present study provides a snapshot of current CIE provision in UK universities. It is an empirically focused paper (e.g. Jing et al. 2023) which addresses questions about the nature, coverage, and orientations of CIE teaching in the 2020s. The modest intention of this study is to inform CIE practitioners about what is happening beyond their own classrooms, and support reflection and decision-making around the curriculum.

### **Study design**

This study results from a collaboration between two UK universities – the University of Bristol and the University of Wolverhampton – with ethical approval granted by the latter. From 2020 to 2024, data collection and analysis were undertaken in three stages. Firstly, we conducted internet searches to identify undergraduate and master’s education programmes in UK universities, and contacted programme leads and heads of schools, with requests to share handbooks for courses on comparative and/or international education. Requests were also sent via professional networks, including the British Association of Comparative and International Education (BAICE) mailing list and social media accounts.

In total, 55 unit handbooks<sup>1</sup> were collected from 30 UK universities, which included 28 English institutions and one each from Wales and Scotland. Of these, 14 are ‘pre-1992’ and 16 ‘post-1992’ universities, the latter referring to traditionally more teaching-oriented institutions which gained university status in the 1990s (e.g. Deem and Lucas 2007). Of the 55 handbooks, 40 relate to undergraduate units (17 from pre-1992, 23 from post-1992) and 15 to master’s units, where all but two are from pre-1992 institutions.

An inductive approach was taken to coding handbooks to identify thematic and geographical coverage. This approach was trialled and refined based on the content analysis of undergraduate materials (Cameron et al. 2023), and we extended the analysis to include a bibliometric component. For this component, all references to texts and all other resources, including audio and visual formats, were pulled from the handbooks; from these references, we tabulated the type of text, the primary authors, and the provenance. Alongside this curriculum analysis, interviews were also conducted with seven CIE teachers from pre- and post-1992 institutions focusing on the purposes, priorities and challenges of CIE teaching. Findings based on interview data are reported

elsewhere (Mitchell et al. 2021, 8–12), but this article makes selective use of this material for illustrative purposes to support our analysis of curriculum materials.

### The nature of CIE taught in UK universities

This section considers the nature of CIE taught in UK universities with respect to its thematic and geographical coverage. In doing so we identify patterns and preoccupations, as well as potential areas of neglect. The titles of the 55 course handbooks collected for this study illustrate the diversity of the field, ranging from generic, introductory offerings (e.g. ‘Comparative Education’, ‘Comparing Education’, ‘Introduction to International Education’, ‘Global Perspectives on Education’) to courses with particular substantive specialisms (e.g. technology, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)) or regional foci (e.g. ‘Education in Europe’, or ‘Education Viewed from the Global South’). Examination of the texts cited in these handbooks can provide some insight on these courses.

### Bibliometric analysis – what and whose work is cited?

Across the 55 handbooks, reference is made to a total of 1947 texts and other resources. The most common materials are books, chapters and journal articles, with postgraduate courses making greater use of the latter. Alongside these traditional academic sources, roughly half of the units cite grey literature, such as reports by UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank and international NGOs, with the Global Education Monitoring Report prominent amongst these. New media such as videos and podcasts are less common. Podcasts feature in only three handbooks (one of which makes weekly use of podcasts alongside traditional readings); and videos, including YouTube links, are included in just six units. It is likely, of course, that such resources are used more than is reported in handbooks, which is a limitation to using handbooks as a basis for curriculum analysis.

In terms of *whose* work is being cited, most prominent are the authors of CIE textbooks or primers (e.g. Bignold and Gayton 2009; Marshall 2014; Phillips and Schweisfurth 2014). The most cited author appears in reading lists for 23 units, with all but two of these references relating to a CIE textbook; the second most-cited author appears in 15 handbooks, again with reference to a textbook. The most frequently referenced authors are UK-based academics at pre-1992 institutions: at the time of writing, the top ten authors include three affiliated to University College London, two to Oxford, and one each to Bristol and Cambridge. Two are at post-1992 institutions (Liverpool Hope University and University of Derby), and another is based overseas in the USA.

While a handful of books are cited multiple times across the dataset, we did not find recurrent references to specific journal articles, only two of which are cited more than twice across the dataset: Schweisfurth (2013), which appears in three postgraduate handbooks, and Nussbaum (2006), which appears in two each for undergraduate and postgraduate. Lists of recommended journals feature in 32 handbooks (58%). Again, with journals, we see a dominance of UK-based scholarship. The three top-cited journals are all based in the UK: *Comparative*

*Education* appears in 18 handbooks, followed by *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* (14), and *International Journal of Educational Development* (11). The USA-based *Comparative Education Review* is fourth most-cited, appearing in eight handbooks. The remainder of the top ten is dominated by journals for international development, rather than those focusing on comparison of education in high-income countries.

Thus, across the different facets of the bibliometric analysis, we identified a persistent ‘UK orientation’ to the material cited, as reflected in the dominant voices framing the field in introductory textbooks and hosting academic journals.

### What is the thematic focus of CIE teaching?

To explore the kinds of themes raised in CIE courses, we assigned keywords to provide a bird’s eye view of the topics covered in the units. Each handbook was assigned between 6 and 20 keywords based on its content. Keywords include generic terms, such as ‘globalisation’ and ‘inequalities’, along with more specific terms, such as ‘global governance’ and ‘poverty’ depending on the degree of specificity in the handbook. The keywords came from a controlled vocabulary set which was developed inductively over the course of the cataloguing process and eventually included 86 keywords that appeared two or more times across the dataset. [Table 1](#) ranks the keywords which appear 10 or more times and gives the number of handbooks (out of 55) where each was assigned.

The top three codes – globalisation, cross-national comparison, and policy transfer – are consistent across undergraduate and master’s handbooks. This is followed by keywords which emphasise international development and global efforts to increase access to, and equity within, education. Issues of gender, especially girls’ education, feature strongly in undergraduate units, as do disability, race, poverty, and social justice. Postcolonial and decolonial theories are also represented across both phases, appearing in 25% of undergraduate and 40% of master’s units, an issue we return to later. As we will

**Table 1.** Keyword coding of unit handbooks.

Keywords	# of handbooks	% of total
globalisation	41	75%
cross-national comparison	34	62%
policy transfer	31	56%
global development goals (MDGs, SDGs, Education for all)	25	45%
gender (including feminism, gender equality)	20	36%
inequalities (unspecified)	19	35%
culture	16	29%
postcolonial/decolonial theories	16	29%
international development	16	29%
social justice	15	27%
higher education	14	25%
race, including Critical Race Theory	13	24%
children/youth, including children’s voices	13	24%
language in education (including English language teaching, global spread of language)	13	24%
poverty	12	22%
inclusion and inclusive education	12	22%
neoliberalism	11	20%
international large-scale assessments (e.g. PISA, TIMSS)	10	18%

see later, this critical focus reflects wider patterns in the orientation of CIE teaching, discussed in greater detail later in the article.

### **Geographical coverage**

Three-quarters of the handbooks contain one or more geographical reference, whether to nation states or regions, as seen in these titles for weekly sessions: ‘Week 3: The view from sub-Saharan Africa: decolonising the mind’ and ‘Week 11: Ubuntu and African models of education’ (pre-1992 UG). In many cases, particularly in master’s handbooks, regional markers are used in place of specific nations: for example, from one course description, ‘students will develop critical understanding and analytical tools to understand educational issues in the Global North and the Global South’ (pre-1992 PG). To give a sense of the overall distribution of regional engagement, Table 2 contains a count of regions present in unit overviews and reference lists, combining references to specific countries (‘Botswana’) and to regions (‘Africa’), which were assigned based on World Bank classifications.<sup>2</sup>

The most frequently named country is the United Kingdom, appearing in 40 handbooks (70%), followed by USA (15/27%) and Germany (11/20%). Three countries in the Asia and Pacific region follow: China (11/20%), India (9/16%), and Australia (8/15%), with high-income countries occupying the remainder of the top ten: Canada, France, Finland and Sweden. The most-cited nations for Africa and the Middle East are Tanzania (5/9%) and Palestine (3/5%), respectively.

Undergraduate handbooks often include specific named countries as the focus for a particular week, for example, ‘Case study: India’ (post-1992 UG) or ‘Comparing schools, teachers and teacher education – Culturally situated concepts, France, Denmark, England. Evaluating lessons for France?’ (post-1992 UG). The spotlight is sometimes turned on a particular country as illustrative of a wider phenomenon. For example, Cuba is used to explore socialist models of education and Sweden as a social democratic model, while Chile functions as an example of neoliberal marketisation; one course takes a comparative perspective on early childhood education in India, the UK and the USA, while another compares SEND provision in Canada and Australia. Where African nations are named, they often appear as non-specific case studies. Throughout, ‘the developing world’ is presented as a space for exploring ‘global challenges facing access to education for all’ (pre-1992 UG), children’s rights and legacies of empire on schooling, among other topics.

**Table 2.** References to regions in handbooks.

Region	# of handbooks	% of total
Europe <sup>3</sup>	42	76%
South and East Asia & the Pacific <sup>4</sup>	35	64%
Sub-Saharan Africa	19	35%
North America	15	27%
‘Global South’, ‘low- and middle-income countries’, ‘developing countries’	12	22%
Latin America & the Caribbean	10	18%
‘Global North’, ‘West/ern’, ‘high income’	7	13%
Middle East & North Africa	6	11%

In contrast, the content descriptors in master's handbooks make fewer explicit references to nation states. The UK is referenced only three times. The names of nation states appear in the titles of reference materials, such as journal articles, but otherwise, it is notable that master's units do not give the same emphasis to specific named contexts as seen in undergraduate units, which may suggest a more conceptual and less contextual focus.

Overall, the geographical coverage of CIE teaching might be characterised as 'UK-centric', for its treatment of the UK as a 'reference society' (Crossley 2021) and emphasis on countries marked by ongoing legacies of the British Empire. Areas of comparative neglect include Latin America, the former Soviet and socialist republics, Francophone Africa, and much of North Africa. In interviews, one teacher noted this orientation towards sub-Saharan Africa, despite the student body being 'much more Asia focused ... particularly China' (Teacher 2, pre-1992 institution). Another teacher noted a reluctance to teach beyond their own expertise, perhaps indicating why countries within a British sphere of influence continue to dominate: for teaching about countries such as Sweden or Cuba, for example, 'you'll need to know something about the language, you'll need to have had contacts there. You can't just kind of walk into a classroom and start teaching on Cuba, you need to know some kind of background on it' (Teacher 6, post-1992 institution).

When it comes to our reporting on geographical coverage in CIE teaching, we should note some limitations to the approach. For example, it is common for publications focused on the UK and the USA to omit geographical markers in their titles, which is a challenge for geographical coding. In several instances, the UK context is implied rather than explicitly mentioned. For example, one handbook asserts: 'This module ... may be of particular interest to those who would like to work abroad or in an international context' (post-1992 UG). Here, 'work abroad' and 'international context' appear to suggest any country outside the UK. Other codes can 'stand in' for geographic foci, especially for those with experience in the field: reference to 'OECD', 'World Bank' and 'policy transfer' provides understanding of the probable regions or nations that will be covered or referenced within the class without stating them outright. There are additional challenges in logging geographic coverage according to the names of nation states. For example, in referring to refugee populations, a refugees' nationality may be captured (e.g. 'Syrian refugees') or their country of refuge (e.g. UK), depending on how this is expressed in the handbook – thus, one piece of information may be lost, either the nationality or the country of refuge. Additionally, a focus on nation states means that indigenous or boundary-less movements are not well captured; however, 'indigeneity' was picked up in the broad keyword mapping.

Overall, the geographical mapping offers some tentative insights on the nature of CIE taught in UK universities. First, the geographic data demonstrates broad coverage of regions, with reference to six of the seven continents across the dataset. However, the dominance of nations from the British colonial sphere further suggests a preoccupation with the UK, particularly in undergraduate units.

### Three orientations to teaching CIE: positivist, socio-cultural and critical

In discussing the value of CIE for students, the teachers we interviewed highlighted its contribution to students' *critical thinking* and *intercultural learning*. In the words of one teacher, CIE can:

[help] to de-centre them a little bit, and make them think about their own experiences in the light of educational practice more widely . . . It is a window onto the world . . . a kind of internationalisation or inter-cultural training. [W]hen you learn about education in different places, you learn about other places, other contexts, other histories, other ways of living, other cultures. (Teacher 1, pre-1992 institution)

While this view on the value of CIE may be shared by many, it is by no means the only perspective in UK universities. In reviewing course materials, we identified three broad orientations to CIE, based on its purported value or purposes and associated commitments, which we labelled as 'positivist', 'socio-cultural', or 'critical' CIE. Apart from four units which lacked enough information for classification, we found that most units sit fairly comfortably in one or other of these categories; this section considers the prevalence and characteristics of each orientation.

#### Positivist CIE

The units in this category broadly take an economic or technocratic perspective on education, in terms of its value, processes and outcomes, and reflect a liberal capitalist or neoliberal economic perspective (McCowan 2015; C. C. Wolhuter, Espinoza, and McGinn 2024). Handbooks draw on narratives of national development and productivity and give emphasis to 'best practice' and 'what works' across different contexts. International large-scale assessments are referenced, particularly PISA league tables, with limited – if any – critique. For example, the reading list from one post-1992 UG institution listed key texts from the World Bank, the Global Education Monitoring Report, and a mass market book on 'top-performing' education systems.

Units in this category particularly emphasise *problem solving*, with CIE presented as a means of determining solutions. For example, one unit indicates a focus on the effects of globalisation on education across the world, and CIE approaches for 'the formulation of appropriate solutions' (post-1992 UG). More often than not, 'challenges' are located in the Global South. For example, one handbook refers to 'challenges facing access to education for all, particularly in the developing world and the role of governments and international organisations in seeking to overcome these' (pre-1992 UG). The same text refers to barriers to education such as 'corrupt governments, global poverty, gender discrimination, culture, religion, child labour, trafficking in human beings, slavery, war, child soldiers and refugees,' without reference to colonial legacies, or the impact of marketisation and neoliberalism.

Positivist CIE is very much the minority position, reflected in 6 of 55 handbooks (11%), comprising four (10%) undergraduate units (three from post-1992 universities) and two (13%) postgraduate (one each at pre- and post-1992 universities). Further research is needed to establish whether or not this orientation is more common in post-1992 universities, as suggested by our limited data.

## Sociocultural CIE

The second broad orientation to CIE noted in the handbooks is a socio-culturally situated perspective, in line with Sadler's work (Phillips 2020). 23 (42%) of units fit this category, with this orientation more common at undergraduate level.

Whereas units with a more positivist orientation frame CIE as a problem-solving tool, sociocultural CIE emphasises description and understanding of different forms of education and its contexts. For example, one handbook presents the unit as '[an] opportunity to understand the development of more than one country's education system and their unique historical, socio-economic context' (post-1992 UG). Another 'provides an introduction to the field of comparative education by exploring aspects of education systems in our closest Continental neighbours' (post-1992 UG). As with the previous category, unit descriptions include terms such as *introduce*, *understand*, *consider*, *explore* and *examine*; however, these units do not suggest a correct or 'best' answer but remain more open and speculative, reflecting an 'academic' gaze over a technocratic one.

The units in this category are often presented as an introduction or orientation to the field, preparing students with the 'tools of the trade' for cross-national comparison. A number of the units, particularly at undergraduate level, reflect the view of CIE quoted by the teacher at the start of this section, as 'a kind of internationalisation or intercultural training'. For example, as highlighted earlier, a unit for Year 2 students at a post-1992 institution is positioned as 'of particular interest to those who would like to work abroad or in an international context' with 'plenty of opportunities in it for you to develop skills that are relevant to your employability and which you could note in your CV.' Another UG post-1992 unit 'offers the student a global perspective to support their development as global professionals [and] engagement with international opportunities is of academic and employment benefit for students in higher education.'

While these units refer to 'critical engagement' and sometimes include critical perspectives as additional points of view, they do not require significant engagement with texts presenting arguments for a postcolonial, decolonial, feminist or related efforts which challenge dominant power structures. In common with the 'positivist CIE' units, a number of those classed as socio-cultural focus on what might be regarded as 'Global South ills': namely, extensive focus on issues of poverty, inequality, and other forms of harm that exist in the Global South, while overlooking the presence of similar issues in the Global North, in ways which appear to perpetuate colonial power dynamics. This is evident in a unit which includes a wide variety of 'reporting'-type texts on issues like child labour, child soldiers, and civil war, with emphasis on grey literature. At another pre-1992 institution, an undergraduate unit purports to 'look at a range of key issues such as quality in education systems, gender inequality and child labour.' Students may choose to focus an assignment on an 'identified group [which] can be national, regional or global [e.g. socio-economically disadvantaged children in India; girls in East Africa; children in conflict].' The focus on 'Global South ills' was not evidenced in the master's units.

## Critical CIE

The third orientation shares much in common with 'socio-cultural CIE', but while the latter is concerned with describing and understanding, the critical orientation reflects

a more directed, axiological commitment to uncovering and challenging inequitable power relations. As indicated earlier, this perspective is increasingly emphasised in CIE through decolonial and postcolonial movements, and those advocating for the transformation of CIE in research and education (e.g. Shields and Paulson 2025; Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017). Based on a systematic review of global CIE curricula, M. Li, Li, and Yuan (2024) suggest a framework for critical CIE pedagogy, which moves away from ‘academic’ discussions and understandings of inequalities and injustices to curricula which foregrounds local actors and communities, encourages partnership-based learning, roots out colonial logics, and fosters critical thinking skills to equip students to campaign for global justice. This orientation is strongly represented in the UK dataset, containing 22 (40%) of the units (the second largest category overall), comprising 14 (35% of) undergraduate units (eight pre-1992, six post-1992), and 8 (53% of) masters units (all pre-1992 universities).

In contrast to the other orientations, critical CIE handbooks do not position education as a universal or axiomatic good but as a site of contestation. For example, at a pre-1992 institution, a UG coursebook asks students to ‘challenge some of taken-for-granted assumptions about education and development and consider a range of perspectives on how education might contribute to development in the 21st century.’ At another UG pre-1992 institution, they are to ‘explore the role of formal education as a tool of colonialism in Africa through the imposition of foreign languages and curricula which de-value local knowledge, culture and perspectives.’ Others investigate alternative approaches to mainstream schooling, such as Montessori, Te Whariki, Unitierra Oaxaca, forest schools, Radical Education, and others.

Handbooks categorised as critical CIE went beyond an ‘introduction’ to liberal capitalist concepts seen in socio-cultural CIE to demonstrate meaningful critique of neoliberalism, marketisation and privatisation. The depth of critical engagement was judged by the directness of the language used, and by references which provide lengthy, sustained critiques. For example, one pre-1992 PG unit includes a session dedicated to Human Capital theory, asking students to consider: ‘How are the economy and economic growth ... [and] education and employment ... [and] measuring the relationship between education and economic growth more complicated than it seems in the basic understanding of human capital theory?’

Units within this orientation are often critical of the cross-national transfer of education policies and approaches, with a focus on specific tools and instruments. For example, a session in one pre-1992 master’s unit considers: ‘the “deficit discourse” surrounding teacher professionalism in the Global South ... alongside recent pedagogical interventions, such as the World Bank’s *Teach* lesson observation instrument and the rise of scripted lessons.’ Required readings include Tabulawa’s (2003) critique of learner-centred pedagogy. Likewise, an undergraduate unit at a pre-1992 institution provides ‘opportunities to consider the work of international organisations, including the United Nations, as well as non-governmental organisations, and initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All.’ While this language is similar to what is found in socio-cultural CIE units, the readings provide substantial critique of the education for development architecture and policies.

The reading list for another undergraduate unit at a post-1992 university included seminal postcolonial texts by Franz Fanon and Edward Said, a journal special issue on

Aboriginal voices, readings on indigenous education, the Occupy movement, and forms of community-based education. Another UG unit at a pre-1992 institution highlights work by anti-colonial thinkers Julius Nyerere and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. In an interview, a CIE teacher at a pre-1992 institution explained that the 'privileging of scholarship from the Global South' was a conscious choice and represented a 'learning journey' for both teacher and students (Teacher 3). Another emphasised that CIE 'ought to be, if it's done well, a highly politicised subject area,' engaging critically with topics such as decolonisation, Black Lives Matter, and issues related to trans lives and gender identity, among others (Teacher 6).

Across the critical handbooks we saw important examples of units pushing learners to think critically and to engage with a wide range of ideas and perspectives. However, we did not record any instances of courses requiring action on the part of students, which is one criterion of Li et al.'s (2024) framework for critical CIE pedagogy. In terms of geographical foci, we also note limited engagement with non-European forms of imperialism, such as that involving Russia, Japan, Turkey or China (Vickers 2020), the latter of which might be particularly pertinent given the large student population from those contexts (HESA 2024).

### Reflections on the teaching CIE in the UK study

This study has provided fresh empirical evidence on the nature of CIE as taught in UK universities. It offers an overview of geographical and thematic foci, and different orientations to the field, through the most extensive audit this century. In this final section, we draw together key findings and consider implications for research and practice.

First, this study offers some nuance to the well-documented dominance of Western scholarship in higher education (M. Li, Li, and Yuan 2024). Not only are CIE units in the UK dominated by the voices of English speaking, Global North scholars (e.g. Casellato 2023; Suspitsyna 2019), but specifically by *British* scholarship, with emphasis given to UK-based authors and journals, often over comparable international publications such as USA-based Comparative Education Review. Similarly, our study finds patterns in geographical coverage that reflect the UK's former colonial sphere of influence. This is the case, too, in courses with a more critical orientation, which show a lack of attention to non-Western forms of imperialism. On the one hand, it is unsurprising that teachers tend to draw on their own – and colleagues' – areas of specialism in CIE courses, leading to UK-centric reference materials. From its earliest days, CIE has involved drawing lessons about 'others' abroad and bring them 'home' (Nordtveit 2015). Indeed, in interviews, teachers indicated reliance on using examples from their own experience ('I think you tend to understand a place more deeply if you've personally researched it or lived there', Teacher 1, pre-1992 institution). Nevertheless, given the changes to the student body noted earlier, we might expect greater attention to China, which featured in only five of the 40 (12.5%) undergraduate courses. Taken together, these findings beg the question: are we teaching 'CIE' as a field, or is this a UK version of CIE? A follow-up question might be – should our teaching reflect more balanced global coverage? While our

research didn't examine the biographical characteristics of CIE teachers, such as gender, ethnicity and nationality, it points to the value of a diverse CIE teaching workforce able to bring both lived knowledge and acquired expertise to the classroom (Nam et al. 2023).

Secondly, while economic-oriented institutions such as OECD and the World Bank are exerting an ever-wider influence on education decision-making globally (Auld, Rappleye, and Morris 2019; Edwards et al. 2023) we find that CIE courses in UK universities largely eschew this orientation, giving far greater emphasis to socio-cultural and critical perspectives. This reflects academic concerns over the practical applications of comparison undertaken by policy makers and international agencies (Bray, Adamson, and Mason 2014). As noted elsewhere, such as for Germany (Parreira Do Amaral and Hornberg 2016), CIE teaching in UK universities does not currently focus on developing the statistical skills which are used by economically oriented institutions. We are not advocating this, but rather, noting the gulf between what is taught on CIE courses in the UK, and the kinds of CIE which is currently most influential in the policy space. Further research would be helpful to explore graduates' uses of their CIE education.

We present the evidence from this article to encourage and support reflexivity amongst CIE teachers on the extent to which the patterns and preoccupations identified in the UK dataset reflect tendencies in their own teaching. As suggested, there is particular value in reflecting on the representativeness of coverage and orientations. How can CIE teachers support the next generation of CIE graduates to develop critical perspectives beyond the UK's sphere of influence?

Looking ahead, further study is needed to understand whether this text-based analysis is reflective of real-world practice in CIE classrooms. The review might be extended through classroom observation and student interviews to offer deeper understanding of the purposes and processes of CIE education, and be expanded to have more balanced coverage of all four nations within the United Kingdom, especially given the limitations of the present study, where evidence is largely derived from England, with just one institution each from Wales and Scotland, respectively. Finally, in an era where those university degrees viewed as esoteric and providing poor job prospects are being scrapped, insight is needed on the linkages between CIE education and different occupational and practice contexts. Is CIE teaching still, as Schweisfurth (1999) stated more than 25 years ago, 'professionally oriented'? Addressing issues like this may promote the health and survival of the field as the century rolls on.

## Notes

1. In this article the generic term 'handbook' is used to describe the reference materials which contain key information about the content of a module, course or unit.
2. These regions and the national groupings within them are taken from the World Bank's regional groupings, found here: <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>.
3. Includes two handbooks which reference Russia.
4. Includes three handbooks which reference Australia and one for New Zealand.

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