

‘All the Random Students [like us]’: The Global University and its Others

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of non-Western European (NWE) students, from post-socialist countries, enrolled in the International Studies in Education Programme (ISEP) at the University of Iceland. Drawing on critical internationalisation studies and postcolonial theory, it analyses how global white supremacy, racial triangulation, and neoliberal precarity shape these students’ identities and senses of belonging within an ostensibly egalitarian academic setting. Informed by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Johann Herder’s romantic nationalism, and the notion of Euro-Orientalism, the study conceptualises NWE students as ‘exotic insiders’, who must negotiate symbolic whiteness and conditional inclusion. The methodology combines 5.5 hours of semi-structured interviews (126 transcript pages) with the author’s reflexive narrative. The findings expose a dissonance between Icelandic ideals of multiculturalism and students’ lived realities, revealing the limitations of incremental reform and the need for transformative, decolonial interventions. In doing so, the study advances critical debates on pedagogy, coloniality, and systemic inequities in Nordic higher education.

Keywords: *higher education; decoloniality; whiteness; white supremacy; precarity*

Introduction: Neoliberal Imaginations of Globalisation in Higher Education

The global knowledge exchange has transformed higher education (HE), integrating efficiency, competition, and productivity (Walker, 2009). In this context, the internationalisation of higher education (IHE) is often celebrated for its cosmopolitan ideals, and is yet increasingly criticised for entrenching neoliberal governance and structural inequities (Brandenburg & De Wit, 2011; Knight, 2008). Institutions, such as the University of Iceland (UI), are deeply implicated in these dynamics, negotiating global flows, while upholding persistent asymmetries of race, class, and epistemic legitimacy. Anchored in critical internationalisation studies (CIS), this study questions the power structures underpinning international education in the Nordic region. CIS rejects superficial reformism and advocates justice-driven, epistemically

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plural transformation (Stein et al., 2016). By merging CIS with post-colonial and decolonial thought, the study analyses how non-Western European (NWE) students navigate Icelandic academia as ‘exotic insiders’ (Abu-Lughod, 1991)—valorised for their European identity, but marginalised by Euro-Orientalism (Adamovsky, 2005; Buchowski, 2006), racial triangulation (Kim, 1999), and global white supremacy (Jesús & Pierre, 2020). This fragile connectedness underscores how whiteness offers conditional inclusion while reinforcing marginality.

Uncritical internationalisation often masks the reproduction of racism, xenophobia, and linguistic exclusion under liberal humanist rhetoric (Lee, 2014; Lee & Rice, 2007). By foregrounding NWE student narratives, this study moves beyond multicultural tokenism to expose deeper logics of symbolic inclusion and systemic inequality. It argues that the Nordic university serves as both gateway and gatekeeper, fetishising diversity while preserving hegemonic norms. This work critiques the Eurocentric and neoliberal approaches to HE analysing race, class, and geopolitics. It proposes reimagining IHE being grounded in decolonial praxis, solidarity, and epistemic justice, and contributes to critical conversations on HE’s complicity in global racial capitalism.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a post-colonial CIS lens to examine the experiences of NWE students in the International Studies in Education Program (ISEP) at UI. CIS offers a systematic deconstruction of neoliberal global education, rejecting superficial reforms in favour of transformative action, rooted in equity, epistemic justice, and structural accountability (Stein et al., 2016). It challenges the assumption that global academic mobility is inherently beneficial, exposing the systemic exclusions embedded in global integration policies. Merging CIS with post-colonial theory, the study conceptualises NWE students as ‘exotic insiders’ (Abu-Lughod, 1991), individuals neither fully embraced nor entirely excluded. Drawing on Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and Euro-Orientalism (Adamovsky, 2005; Buchowski, 2006; Parvulescu, 2015), it argues that these students’ partial proximity to whiteness grants them conditional visibility, which simultaneously celebrates and contains their presence.

The concept of racial triangulation (Kim, 1999) is used to analyse how NWE students are positioned between dominant Icelandic whiteness and racialised non-European otherness. They are valued for a perceived work ethic and cultural fit, but remain symbolically undervalued. This ambiguity is intensified by vulnerability, not only economic but ontological, marked by exclusion, instability, and racialised surveillance (Lazar & Sanchez, 2019). Framing these dynamics is the logic of global white supremacy (Jesús & Pierre, 2020), which constructs whiteness as the standard of modernity and legitimacy. For NWE students, whiteness acts both as a shield offering conditional inclusion, as well as a shackle reinforcing marginality. Their proximity to whiteness does not protect them from its hierarchical structure.

By centring marginalised voices, this study exposes how race, class, and geopolitics shape belonging in Icelandic HE, and society at large. It calls for an ‘internationalisation alternative’, a decolonial reimagining that seeks not just diversification but transformation. This includes critically engaging with practices of ‘passing as an Icelander’, and confronting the disjunction between Iceland’s egalitarian self-image and the systemic exclusions encountered by international students. These contradictions hint at the need to address racialisation and power directly, in order to achieve meaningful change in HE.

Methodology

Design

This study adopts a qualitative, social constructivist methodology, which recognises knowledge as intersubjectively produced and shaped by broader socio-political and economic discourses (Feyerabend, 1970; Kuhn, 1970; Lakatos, 1989). It centres the lived experiences of NWE students from post-socialist countries at Europe’s margins (Loftsdóttir et al., 2023), focusing on their navigation of HE through the ISEP at UI.

Theoretical depth and critical self-positioning are enhanced by the researcher’s reflexive narrative as a former international graduate student. The Icelandic Centre for Research (Rannís) supported this research conducted between 2022 and 2024 (Garcia, 2024). Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit rich, context-sensitive narratives. These adhered to three thematic tiers: (1) personal and educational background; (2) academic and social experiences; and (3) perceptions of belonging and racialised hierarchies. This design allowed participants to reflect on ‘passing as Icelanders’, whiteness, and institutional boundaries. Consistent with Haraway’s (1988) concept of situated knowledge, interviews were treated as affective, relational encounters shaped by context and power dynamics.

Sample

The sample included six ISEP students, selected through convenience and snow-ball sampling, with attention to gender, class, linguistic background, professional diversity, and residence status. Although COVID-19 limited participation, the varied perspectives offered layered insight. To address sample limitations, the study incorporated autoethnographic reflection, enhancing interpretive and epistemic depth. All participants provided informed consent, and are referred to by generic descriptors throughout the text. Interviews were conducted in English, either in person or via Microsoft Teams. The dataset comprised 5.5 hours of recordings, and 126 transcript pages collected between May 2021 and January 2022. Field notes captured non-verbal cues and emotional registers, contributing to affective interpretation (Ayata et al., 2019). Supplementary sources, including UI course catalogues, Equality Days (2021–2025), and the university’s equality policy, were analysed to contextualise institutional discourse and guide interview development.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a hybrid of deductive and inductive coding in Atlas.ti. Deductive codes, drawn from post-colonial and critical race theory, included social hierarchies, symbolic boundaries, and racialisation. Inductive codes uncovered emergent motifs such as silent resistance, imposter affect, and dual positionality. Special attention was paid to silences, pauses, and embodiment, following critical discourse and affective analysis frameworks (Barbour, 2014; Gould, 2009). Limitations include the small sample size, online interview constraints, and pandemic-era logistics challenges. These were addressed through follow-up communication, reflexive engagement, and detailed field notes. The researcher’s positionality was consistently upheld to prevent appropriating marginalised voices, and to amplify participants’ agency. This multi-method, reflexive approach revealed how racialised hierarchies and global power asymmetries shaped the educational trajectories of NWE students in Iceland. Their narratives offered insight into how post-socialist students negotiated, resisted, and navigated the symbolic order of whiteness in Nordic HE.

Research Findings

Subjectivity and Subject Position

NWE students at UI occupy ambiguous subject positions shaped by Orientalism, Euro-Orientalism, and global white supremacy. Often regarded as exotic insiders (Abu-Lughod, 1991), they navigate a paradoxical landscape of semi-inclusion. They are praised for their work ethic (e.g. being *duglegur*), and yet stigmatised as Eastern Europeans or post-Soviet (Buchowski, 2006; Parvulescu, 2015). A common experience among participants was ‘passing as Icelanders’. Students reported that physical resemblance allowed temporary acceptance. However, this often collapsed once they spoke or acted outside normative cultural expectations. The theme of ‘passing as Icelanders’ highlighted the duality of physical resemblance, whilst linguistic and cultural differences emphasised their outsider status. As Participant A explained: ‘Most of the time on the street and in public services, they address me in Icelandic... but as soon as I open my mouth and say what I think, that is very far from Icelandic.’

Moreover, Europeanness appears to be a contributing factor to their perceived privileged position compared to non-European Union (EU) peers. In this context, participants were asked if they had ever heard the comment, ‘We need more people like you in this country’. As a minor auto-ethnographic and positionality account, the formulation of this question was informed by the researcher’s own subjective experiences. Having heard this from Icelanders twice, I had not problematised this before. However, in the context of racial hierarchies and racial triangulation, I found it pertinent to ask. Several confirmed subjects had heard this. However, it was unclear to them what the statement implied, and again it was associated with variations of *duglegur*: very good workers, very devoted, and hard-working. They generally regarded the statement as a compliment, as indicated by another participant: ‘Probably, it was

just like some compliment that people from, you know, Eastern Europe, they are... are very good workers, very devoted and hard-working. So, it was in such a context.'

This conditional acceptance and visibility exemplify the fluidity of racial and civic belonging in Iceland. Although whiteness enables some degree of 'passing', students' Eastern European origins position them in a liminal space, visibly included yet structurally excluded. This marginalisation is further intensified by class status and precarious labour conditions. Like many international and non-EU students (Garcia, 2025), NWE students often rely on multiple jobs, and confront bureaucratic obstacles, such as delayed work permits and exploitative employment. Their position supports what Kim (1999) and Parvulescu (2015) theorised as racial triangulation: valorised for their labour and cultural compatibility, yet denied full societal or institutional inclusion. This partial inclusion allows Icelandic institutions to project cosmopolitan openness, while maintaining hierarchies of privilege. As Participant B bluntly noted when asked whether passing as an Icelander impacted career opportunity after graduation: 'Unfortunately, yes.'

In Iceland, 'passing' becomes a survival strategy that offers limited protection while reinforcing epistemic erasure. Like other contexts, from Nazi Germany's racial classifications (Griech-Poelle, 2014) to contemporary Brazil's whitening narratives (Loftsdóttir et al., 2021), students adjusted their self-presentation, and engaged in *partial assimilation within a symbolic order that privileges whiteness while denying true belonging*.

Global White Supremacy, (Euro-)Orientalism, and Racialised Hierarchies

The experiential reality of NWE students revealed how global white supremacy structured social and institutional hierarchies in Iceland. White students had an advantage over non-Europeans. Nonetheless, they remained subordinate to Western European and Anglosphere peers. Students reported various forms of academic and workforce discrimination and exclusion. Participant B, for example, recalled: 'When I was working in the service sector in Iceland, I felt discrimination because I am a young foreign woman from Eastern Europe, a post-Soviet country.'

Others, like Participant A and Participant C, emphasised that phenotypic resemblance sometimes enabled superficial acceptance. Yet deeper forms of exclusion persisted—particularly for peers with darker skin or visibly non-Icelandic features. As one noted: 'It is easier for Icelanders to employ somebody who speaks Icelandic or looks Icelandic... but for people with darker skin or frizzy hair, it is not so easy.'

Such testimonies denote racialised privilege and the conditionality of whiteness in Iceland. It is not an absolute marker of inclusion, but is rather a hierarchical gradient that positions Eastern Europeans above racialised non-Europeans, yet below native Icelanders and Western Europeans. The result is a stratified visibility, what Espiritu (2003) calls 'partial presence', where students are recognised as useful labour, but excluded as full civic subjects. The act of passing as Icelanders, which recurred across

interviews, was not simply about blending in, but had served as a survival strategy shaped by the interplay of race, language, and affect. Furthermore, this dynamic reveals broader historical patterns of strategic conformity.

‘Passing’ is a performative shift in subject positions (Caughie, 1999), which resonates with historical anxieties over lineage (Arendt, 2022; Defourneaux, 1979; Lee, 2016) and strategic survival, as seen in passing as Aryan in Nazi Germany (Griech-Poelle, 2014, p. 76), or passing as middle-class in 17th-century Europe (Arendt, 2022). In Jamaica, colour-coded identities shift with historical and political expediency (Scafe, 2022), while Brazilians of Icelandic descent often downplay Black or Indigenous heritage to claim White Nordic ancestry and its corresponding social capital (Loftsdóttir et al., 2021). The students in this study became legible, not through authentic inclusion, but through alignment with idealised notions of Icelandic whiteness. This reflects Euro-Orientalist logics, in which Eastern Europeans are constructed as familiar-yet-foreign: sufficiently proximate to be productive, but sufficiently distant to remain culturally othered. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) warned, the globalisation of race as a United States (U.S.)-centric binary obscures these European-specific dynamics. In the Nordic context, whiteness is not monolithic: it appears to be stratified, racialised, and entangled with geopolitical and historical imaginaries.

Institutional Barriers, Precarity, and Prejudice

The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine intensified the precarity experienced by NWE students, exposing significant gaps in institutional support at the University of Iceland (UI). Participants described student services as opaque and unresponsive. As Participant C noted: ‘It is like a mystery: student counselling is not approachable; there is a lack of support... you are on your own in a sea of courses and academic paths.’

Limited access to career-orientated courses in English further constrained students’ professional options. The curriculum, heavily focused on Viking-themed and Icelandic heritage content, further entrenched their cultural marginalisation. Participant D noted that students who did not identify with these dominant cultural narratives were relegated to the status of ‘random students’, they existed but remained structurally peripheral. This exclusion extended to student politics, on which she reflected: ‘Yeah, I would like to express my opinions... at least by voting. But maybe [...] that should be somehow more available to ... all the random students *[like us]*.’

These narratives illuminate a broader disjuncture between the egalitarian self-image of a Nordic HE institution, and the exclusionary realities experienced by international students. Cairns (2017) highlights a persistent imbalance in Erasmus exchanges, wherein international students select host destinations based on perceived inclusivity, while domestic students are increasingly marginalised by market-driven transnationalisation. The parallels between Lisbon and Reykjavík point to a broader

neoliberal paradox in which internationalisation, while portrayed as a strategy for diversity, often produces gentrification and social stratification (Calvo, 2018; Corbett et al., 2015; França et al., 2018, 2023).

In Iceland, this paradox materialises in the valorisation of mediaeval and Viking studies, what Halewood and Hannam (2001) describe as ‘heritage tourism’. This aligns with the European Commission’s broader strategic framework (Richards, 1996, p. 261), but perpetuates masculinist, Eurocentric visions of modernity (Bureychak, 2013; Knox & Hannam, 2007). These strategies reify essentialist cultural concepts rooted in Herder’s romantic nationalism (Wilson, 1973), where national identity is attributed to the landscape and the ancient language, rather than material development (Goldin-Perschbacher, 2014). This commodification of an imagined past is diffused through Icelandic heritage research (Eypórsdóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2016; Lund et al., 2017) and police research (Bergsdóttir & Eypórsdóttir, 2024), obscuring structural exclusions behind myths of a classless, gender-equal utopia (Broddason & Webb, 1975; Þrastardóttir & Kjaran, 2023; Vilhjálmsson, 2022).

Language as a *Dispositif* of Exclusion

Within this context, the Icelandic language operates as both a cultural symbol and a *dispositif* of exclusion. It is framed strictly, either as a treasure threatened by foreign influence, or as a barrier explaining immigrant segregation. A recent UN report exemplified this when the Icelandic envoy attributed labour market segregation to ‘language proficiencies’ (OHCHR, 2024), effectively shifting the burden onto migrants, and framing workforce segmentation as a lack of skill rather than a structural gatekeeping mechanism.

As Wojtyńska et al. (2022) note, language enforces institutional hierarchies. Participant B recounted being discouraged from attending in-person sessions, despite being allowed to submit assignments in English, exemplifying how language governs perceptions of belonging. Several participants discussed how whiteness, language, and national identity intersected to structure this stratification. Participant F observed, ‘At the top [are] white people like me’, underscoring how racial privilege is inflected through linguistic proximity to Icelandic norms. Participant A extended this insight, highlighting the conditional nature of this privilege:

I think white Europeans ... are accepted and are in a way welcomed ... some Icelanders think that white Europeans or even Eastern Europeans, that we are, you know ... very *duglegur* [efficient] ... while, for example, I think that people from Asia or Black people, I think it is much more difficult for them here.

However, this acceptance remains fragile and contingent. Participant A juxtaposed her experience with that of a wealthy classmate from Ghana who faced ‘total erasure’ in Iceland. Yet, even when reflecting on her own stability, she acknowledged its

conditional nature: ‘It depends. I have a 100% job work permit, because it is based on my marriage.’

This admission exposes the gendered dimensions of Euro-Orientalism directed at Eastern European women, whose inclusion in the Nordic social order often depends on heteronormative assimilation, marriage to a local man, rather than independent civic recognition. In the Western imagination, they appear not as threatening outsiders but as traditional, family-oriented subjects. Their acceptance by the nation-state is predicated on their capacity to inhabit a domestic role (Eggebø, 2013; Lundström, 2017). This conditional inclusion renders them visible, not as autonomous citizens, but as women domesticated through marriage, with economic rights tethered to their romantic and sexual status. The state thus signals that their worth derives from proximity to an Icelandic citizen, making their integration a revocable privilege, sustained only by the persistence of the marital bond.

Anglosphere Hegemony and the ‘Model Minority’

Interestingly, while NWE students felt privileged compared to non-European students, they remained subordinate to counterparts from the Anglosphere. Non-EEA students from English-speaking countries constitute the second-largest group at UI (Appendix A), suggesting a racialised hierarchy where Anglosphere students sit at the top, favoured by global HE rankings (Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021; Demont-Heinrich, 2010; Hammond, 2016). This aligns with critical internationalisation studies (Andreotti, 2014; Peng, 2022; Stein et al., 2019), which criticise the import of U.S.-centric ‘frontier knowledge’ into European Research Councils (ERCs) (Grosfoguel, 2013; Hoenig, 2017; Lafleur, 2021). This trend pressures researchers to adopt U.S. frameworks to satisfy grant makers (Gaffikin & Perry, 2009), reinforcing a homogenisation that reduces complex identities to tropes.

For NWE students, this results in a specific form of triangulation, where they are the ‘useful’ others. Participant B’s experience in the service sector vividly illustrates this double-bind: ‘When I worked in the service sector ... people just asked me where I was from, and I told them that I was from Lithuania ... they said like, “Oh, so you are mafia”.’

Here, humour conceals a xenophobic stereotype that recalls Buchowski’s (2006) *Homo Sovieticus*: a figure simultaneously romanticised for resilience and stigmatised as criminal. Participants C and E observed similar patterns, noting that Icelanders do not differentiate between Poland, Lithuania, or Estonia, collapsing them into a generic Eastern European category. This reflects what Shih (2005) terms a ‘refusal to familiarise’, a distancing gesture that commodifies the subject. As one student recounted, a manager once praised a Ukrainian colleague’s ‘resilience under artillery fire’ (Sveinsdóttir, 2024), an instrumentalisation of trauma that reduces identity to labour value.

Ultimately, the experiences of NWE students expose the enduring traces of global white supremacy within Nordic education (Jesús & Pierre, 2020). The figure of the *duglegur* Eastern European embodies the ambivalence of the model minority, invited to serve, yet seldom to belong. These insights foreground the urgency of imagining internationalisation otherwise (Stein et al., 2016), as a decolonial praxis that transcends tokenistic inclusion, in order to confront the epistemic violence structuring the global university.

Racial Triangulation and Eastern Europeans in Nordic HE

Using racial triangulation (Kim, 1999, 2022) as a critical framework, this section analyses how NWE students are positioned within Icelandic racial hierarchies. While participants like Participant A and Participant F benefited from limited privileges due to European citizenship or phenotypic whiteness, these advantages remained provisional. Their narratives illustrate a form of racialisation obscured by Eurocentric constructs, where exclusion is organised relationally rather than through binary opposition.

Parvulescu (2015, p. 36) adapted racial triangulation to the European context, arguing that Eastern Europeans are often welcomed as productive labour, yet cast as culturally deficient. This dynamic was vividly illustrated by Participant B's 'mafia' encounter (discussed above), which highlighted the duality of being useful but suspect. Such interactions invoke what Buchowski (2006) terms *Homo Sovieticus*, a figure romanticised for resilience but stigmatised as criminally inclined. Here, Participant B is triangulated by being valorised for the work ethic that makes her employable, yet denied the full civic legitimacy granted to Western Europeans or native Icelanders.

Consequently, whiteness for these students functions not as a stable privilege, but as Parvulescu (2015, p. 39) suggests, a claim to 'lesser precarity'. Participant C's description of navigating the mystery of student services without support illustrates this fragility. Unlike the idealised Western expat or international student, Participants C and E occupy an in-between space: sufficiently proximate to whiteness to avoid the overt racism directed at non-European and non-Western students, yet sufficiently other to remain structurally vulnerable. This reflects Espiritu's (2003) concept of 'partial presence', where students are visible only to the extent of their utility. Their subjectivities are shaped by a racial triangulation that renders them both essential and expendable, *white but not quite*, as Kalmar (2022) astutely puts it. As Maldonado (2006) and Harpalani (2021) demonstrate in other contexts, racial triangulation often commodifies labouring bodies, while rendering them politically and culturally invisible. The compliment reported by Participant D, 'We need more people like you', perfectly encapsulates this commodification. It signals inclusion based on labour power and capacity (*duglegur*) rather than cultural belonging.

Kim (2022) extends this framework to show how nations themselves are racialised. This is evident in the observation by Participants C and E, that Icelanders view Poland, Lithuania, and Estonia as an indistinguishable, inferior bloc. Despite the

students’ legal status as EU citizens, their nations of origin are symbolically positioned below the Western standard. As Participant B noted, Icelanders possess a ‘refusal to familiarise’ (Shih, 2005) with Eastern Europe, preferring the cultural hegemony of the Anglosphere.

Language acts as the primary mechanism for enforcing this triangulation. While Participant A noted she could ‘pass’ on the street, language immediately reinscribed boundaries. As a *dispositif* of Orientalism (Said, 1978, 1985), language regulates access to the top of the hierarchy where Participant F situated ‘white people like me’. However, Participant F’s admission that her status is tied to ‘passing’ reveals the instability of this position. For NWE students, the inability to speak perfect Icelandic does not just limit communication, it marks them as a service-class demographic (Guðmundsson, 2024).

Ultimately, the participants are not simply white or other; they are caught in a triangulated web of lesser precarity. They are positioned above racialised non-Europeans in the labour hierarchy, yet they remain fundamentally excluded from the epistemic and cultural center of the global university.

Most importantly, it is widely accepted, particularly in the European socio-cultural setting, that immigrants are today’s proletarians (Balibar, 2002, p. 50; Casas-Cortés, 2017). In this formulation, the European precariat is internally differentiated by race, citizenship, and labour utility. Importantly, this configuration also harbours the *potential for post-colonial solidarity*. As she writes, the convergence of marginalised subjectivities within the racialised, immigrant precariat forms a subterranean horizon of collective resistance.

As Parvulescu (2015, p. 29) cautions, U.S.-centric racial theories must be carefully translated when applied to European contexts. However, the foundational principles of race as a social construct, the processual nature of racialisation, and the intersection of race and class remain vital tools for understanding the uneven terrain of contemporary HE. This study contributes to that translation, by situating NWE students within the evolving Nordic racial governance style, demonstrating how they are triangulated, commodified, and rendered conditionally visible within a globalised academic order.

Kim (2022) has since expanded the framework globally, linking racial triangulation to white supremacy and U.S. neo-imperialism. Her analysis of South Korea demonstrates how nations themselves, not just individuals, are racialised along both vertical and horizontal dimensions: vertically through global economic stratification, and horizontally through political recognition (Honneth, 1995) and symbolic legitimacy. Despite being a G20 nation and a global soft power, South Korea continues to perceive itself as occupying an inferior symbolic position in the racial hierarchy dominated by the West (Kim, 2022, p. 420). As Kim notes, civic ostracism operates not just through overt discrimination, but also through the *refusal to familiarise*—an intentional distancing, which renders racially designated populations partially present and epistemically invisible (Espiritu, 2003; Gutmann, 1994; Shih, 2005).

The rationale, ‘making them invisible’, is especially relevant to NWE students in Iceland. Although often treated as white, their Eastern European origins mark them as culturally and civically marginal, subject to stereotypes of backwardness, criminality, or excessive resilience. These forms of stigmatisation echo Buchowski’s (2006) notion of *Homo Sovieticus*, a discursive figure that combines romanticised labour utility with moral and cultural inferiority. They also mirror more recent discussions on class positioning (Blachnicka-Ciacek & Budginaite-Mackine, 2022), and *crimmigration* in Europe (Aas, 2011), which imply the existence of those who are seen as having no rightful place in the country: the undesirable and undeserving immigrant, perhaps dependent on the welfare state and unwilling to work, the so-called *crimmigrants* (Aas, 2011).

This exclusionary governing rationale was consolidated in the legislative developments of late 2025. Draft bill S-220/2025 did not arise in a vacuum, but served as the legislative capstone to a year-long discursive campaign defined by the relentless securitisation of the immigrant subject. In the preceding twelve months, the Icelandic public sphere was saturated with shifting, often contradictory portrayals of foreign nationals, from the fleeting ‘taxi driver’ moral panic (Kristinsdóttir, 2024), to unsubstantiated allegations of international criminal syndicates (see e.g. Vilhjálmsson, 2025).

This cumulative production of threat generated the political capital necessary for the Ministry of Justice to introduce its restrictive measures at year’s end. Officially, the bill was presented as a broad effort to align non-EEA/Schengen student regulations with Nordic standards, yet its practical operation discloses a distinctly racialised targeting. The restrictions fall most heavily on student cohorts from the Global South, explicitly identifying applicants from Nigeria, Ghana, and Pakistan as sources of ‘system pressure’ and ‘exploitation’, while remaining conspicuously silent on the substantial numbers of non-EEA students arriving from the Anglosphere (Dómsmálaráðuneytið, 2025; Gunnarsson, 2025). The legislation thus does not seek to curtail student migration per se, but to reorganise it through a racialised hierarchy (Garcia, 2026), translating a year of securitising media noise into the quiet, bureaucratic exclusion of the non-white subject in the Icelandic HE.

Notably, when the draft was opened for public consultation on the governmental portal Island.is (Dómsmálaráðuneytið, 2025), it encountered considerable resistance. The proposal drew critical submissions from higher education institutions, the National Union of Icelandic Students (LÍS), and the Icelandic Confederation of University Graduates (BHM). This broad coalition of academic and professional bodies, industry representatives, and international students articulated unified opposition to the bill’s exclusionary design, arguing that it would severely hinder international recruitment and student mobility. The 56 submitted comments constitute an unusually high volume for such consultations in Iceland.

Border and sovereignty are sustained by ideological notions of what Europe is, and what it is presumed to represent culturally and politically. Eastern Germans see themselves as more Western than Czechs. Czechs position themselves above

Slovaks, who in turn view Ukrainians similarly, until one reaches the ultimate Eastern Europeans, the Russians. When people in the region describe themselves as Central Europeans, they are signalling that they are not like Russians, and wish to be recognised as more Western (Kalmar, 2022). Borders, in this sense, operate as registers of hierarchy and social categorisation, organising diverse populations into graded political communities across the globe. This study engaged this theme without succumbing to categorical fetishism, that is, the treatment of dubious, historically contingent categories as fixed foundations for research and debate (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 60). Instead, it foregrounded how participants’ subject positions were negotiated, contested, and resisted, and how critical relationalities and post-colonial solidarity were articulated in practice.

Language is central to exclusion, functioning both as a boundary marker and as a disciplining mechanism for enforcing national belonging. In this way, the production of difference as a governing apparatus is legitimised through the presence of racialised bodies, and sustained through the operationalisation of language. As a *dispositif*, language demarcates spaces and erects symbolic boundaries (Bryson, 2016; Lamont et al., 2015), contributing to the social and political construction of hierarchies. This dynamic relegates graduates and international students to a service class characterised by low-paid work (Guðmundsson, 2024; Schweyher, 2023), thereby reinforcing a class stratification, in which Icelandic speakers occupy upperclass positions, while foreign-language speakers are confined to a lowerclass status.

Conclusion

The experiences of NWE students in Icelandic HE reveal how racial triangulation, global white supremacy, and precarity are woven into the fabric of the neoliberal university. While these students benefit from partial access to whiteness, and some even European citizenship, such advantages are fragile and conditional, overshadowed by the epistemic and institutional dominance of Anglosphere peers. This ambivalent position, simultaneously privileged and marginalised, exposes the limits of celebratory diversity discourses, and demonstrates the urgency of reimagining education, not as a marketable asset, but rather as a liberatory project, grounded in epistemic justice, anti-racism, and decolonial transformation.

Despite limitations linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, small sample size, and the specific context of ISEP, the study offers important empirical and conceptual contributions to critical internationalisation studies in HE. By foregrounding NWE students’ narratives, it illuminates the gap between Iceland’s egalitarian and multicultural self-image, and the racialised exclusions embedded in everyday academic and bureaucratic practice. In doing so, it challenges the Eurocentric and neoliberal foundations of Icelandic HE, and sketches a horizon for decolonial interventions, capable of unsettling hegemonic knowledge regimes and cultivating more solidaristic institutional cultures.

These findings also carry concrete implications for policy and practice. They can inform UI's International Office, student services, and programme leadership in addressing international students' labour-market experiences, strengthening collaboration with the job market, and expanding meaningful representation in university governance.

Yet whether such reforms will substantively redistribute power, or be absorbed into existing logics of market responsiveness and tokenistic inclusion remains an open question. Future research should deepen the analysis of racial triangulation in Iceland, explore how shifting migration regimes intersect with institutional racism, and map the structural barriers that constrain equitable labour-market access for international students. Equally crucial are critical evaluations of diversity and inclusion initiatives, and their potential complicity in reproducing racial hierarchies. Only through such sustained inquiry and praxis can internationalisation be reconfigured as a site of postcolonial solidarity and systemic transformation, rather than a vehicle for reproducing the global university's racialised order.

Author biography

[To come]

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