

**Disciplinary Guide:**  
**International  
Relations**

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**Written by  
Kalyani Unkule**

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## About the author



KALYANI UNKULE is an Associate Professor at O.P. Jindal Global University, India. Her research complements her practice in intercultural dialogue and impact-driven projects in higher education internationalisation and spiritual learning. Kalyani is a past recipient of the Commonwealth Peace and Reconciliation Challenge Grant and a member of the IIE's National Academy for International Education, a learned society that seeks to advance international higher education in ways that address global challenges.

Email: [kalyani.u7@gmail.com](mailto:kalyani.u7@gmail.com)

## About this series

Research with international students is an interdisciplinary field and there are a wide range of research disciplines which can add to our thinking about this subject. This series brings together global experts to present different research disciplines and their application to this research topic in the aims of encouraging more interdisciplinary thinking.

## How to cite this guide

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# Introduction to international relations as a discipline<sup>1</sup>

The core of International Relations is a deductive analytical approach, wherein the theoretical framework is first outlined, and any given policy, conflict, or behaviour of actors is discussed according to the assumptions, tenets and language of said framework. The advantage of this deductive bent is that it yields shared parameters within which global events might be explained and predicted. For example, the realist school views the international system as anarchic (lacking a centralised governing authority) and hence depicts any occurrence as a function of the interests and postures of the dominant states involved in that situation. The disadvantage of this approach is that it calls for a commitment to a set of axioms about the way the world works, without due recognition to the spatio-temporal specificity of the origins of that worldview or indeed, an explicit recognition of whose interests it serves. The rival school of the realists, the liberal school of international relations, for instance, draws on seventeenth century classical (English) liberalism to formulate the idea that economic interdependence counters the threat of war. What is not explicitly stated is that this mechanism works as long as the international system is organised hierarchically, i.e. as an empire, where the interests of elite in the core and periphery are congruent, and where enrichment of one part of the world is premised on resource extraction, and exploitation, impoverishment, and dumping of waste in another. After all, with its emphasis on negative liberties as safeguards from state/monarchical over-reach – the sanctity of the right to ownership of private property being the cardinal of these rights – classical liberalism was the parent ideology of capitalism. Based on the logic of exponential growth, capitalism, in turn, cannot survive unless the global system is thus arranged, whether dressed as old-school colonialism or as

<sup>1</sup> I have used capital 'I', 'E', and 'R', when referring specifically to the formal disciplines of International Education and International Relations, rather than the practice fields in general.

neo-liberal globalisation. The main point is that International Relations borrows its conceptual building blocks from western political theory but in applying them to the international system, obfuscates their origins and projects their universality – a tendency that leaves the discipline under-equipped to grapple with several key facets of a dynamic global arena.

In the United States, International Relations training is offered as a graduate specialisation within Political Science departments. Due to the influence of the Cold War, it has been customary for students to pursue a regional specialisation, linked to the US State Departments' funding of areas studies for strategic purposes. In the UK, the discipline is better recognised as international politics, while in continental Europe, the European Integration project has heavily influenced the evolution of the discipline in recent decades. In the third world too, history has influenced the reasons why study and research in International Relations are pursued. In postcolonial contexts such as India, for instance, the disciplinary mainstream has focused on geostrategy, driven by overriding concerns for territorial sovereignty and strategic autonomy. At the same time, there exists a significant body of work on third world approaches to international relations and international law which challenges the very foundations of disciplinary orthodoxy.

As with other social sciences, critical lenses and discourses have permeated the fabric of International Relations despite the daunting entry barriers. Scholars of gender in International Relations have articulated how the discipline perceives the world through the eyes of hegemonic masculinity. Scholars of third world approaches have alerted us to how international law was and continues to be an instrument of dispossession, land grab, and imperialist domination. Scholars employing relational approaches have troubled unexamined notions such as the world is flat or that interdependence means everyone is equally dependent. In my own doctoral research, I found that International Relations theory has concentrated overwhelmingly on war or other issues of high politics when constructing an image of the world system. Studying instead the case of multi-level efforts to protect cultural heritage from destruction in conflict and from illegal

trade, I discovered that the nature of global cooperation looks remarkably different and the agency of actors hitherto marginal to the discipline becomes much more pronounced.

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## **What insights might International Education researchers and practitioners gain from engaging with the discipline of International Relations?**

### **1. Where we stand depends on where we sit**

As a discipline that explicitly incorporates the language of (national) interest, International Relations reveals the extent to which our perception of the world is coloured by our physical location. The acknowledging of disharmony in world affairs through engagement with International Relations has inspired debates about the purpose of education and its potential to hold the powerful to account through free academic enquiry and free speech. Yet, this has not been accompanied by a reckoning with and accountability for the role that education has played in shaping present-day reality. Nor has a distancing ensued from the aspiration to universalise the value of a western/elitist idea about education, when the demands of navigating day-to-day lived reality are on one hand so different in different parts of the world, while on the other, recent times have been replete with lessons about our shared vulnerabilities. Much work on international education still takes place in a global north context where received ideas around quality of education and quality of life are seldom called into question, but are rather attested to by influential voices and physical and monetary flows from the global south. An example of this: the question whether international students stay or return post degree is frequently pondered in International Education scholarship. For answers to this question, we have

considered aspects such as visa regulations, employment opportunities, and personal aspirations. However, much of this analysis is immune from a recognition of higher order power relations in the global system which entrench and exacerbate inequality in ways that make population mobility/displacement inevitable.

## **2. Ideational hegemony precedes real world dominance**

The international education landscape has been highly prescriptive about what constitutes good education, where and in what form it is available. Mechanisms such as rankings have been created to uphold these rigid notions and we now find ourselves unable to shake the excessive commercialisation and managerialism they have foisted. But the more insidious aspect is that all of this has been done in the name of quality and excellence. International education has thus become a tool to carry out the civilising mission by other means, just as – per third world analyses of international relations – international law is an instrument of legitimising structural inequalities in a (neo)colonial world order. Third world approaches describe the international system as hierarchical, although technically and rhetorically comprised of (equally) sovereign states. This mirrors back to scholars of international education the hegemonic control of western institutions, cannon, and positivist enquiry over their own discipline, notwithstanding the lip service paid to intercultural dialogue and exchange. To the field's credit, there is a widely shared aspiration to decolonise knowledge creation and practice in International Education. The first step in this direction is to recognise that learning, good ideas, and solutions are equally available everywhere – a shift that instigates a gradual unravelling of the discipline of International Education as we know it.

## **3. The exchange works both ways**

The disciplines of International Education and International Relations share one aspect in common: the perspective of practitioners is vital. In International Relations, practitioner involvement has tilted the scales in favour of realist orthodoxy, since the

practitioners themselves have backgrounds in armed forces and diplomatic services. Au contraire, practitioner involvement in International Education has contributed greatly to pluralising the field and enhanced its capacity to be responsive to a range of lived experience. Perhaps because we deal with concerns that emanate from day-to-day interactions in our classrooms and institutions, I find International Education nimbler and more open as a field. The prominent desire for recognition as a full-fledged discipline in its own right within International Relations, by contrast, leads to stringent gatekeeping on matters of convention and a consequent scenario where work is not taken seriously unless the scholar is a card-carrying member of one of the theoretical schools or committed to a particular analytical approach. It wasn't surprising therefore to recently come across an innovative article discussing International Relations in the journal *Education Philosophy and Theory* (see entry listed among resources below).

But there is one clear way in which International Education can contribute to both, the study and actual conduct of international relations: if the former re-dedicates itself to its original mission of promoting dialogue to find what unites us despite apparent differences, so we may survive and thrive by accessing the many ways of being in and knowing the world.

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# Suggested resources

For an overview of the main theoretical schools

[Structural Realism after the Cold war](#) by Kenneth Waltz, *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), pp. 5–41

For a discussion on the Euro-American-centric nature of the discipline

[The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline: American and European Developments in International Relations](#) by Ole Waever, *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4, (Autumn, 1998), pp. 687-727

For in-depth analysis of how international law upholds neo-colonialism

[Third World Approaches to International Law: A Manifesto](#) by B.S. Chimni, *International Community Law Review* Vol. 8 (2006) pp. 3–27

For insight into how disciplinary conventions are steeped in power dynamics

[Hidden in Plain Sight: Coloniality, Capitalism and Race/ism as Far as the Eye Can See](#) by Olivia U. Rutazibwa, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* Vol. 48 No. 2 (2020) pp. 221–241

For a recent example of International Relations work appearing in lead International Education journal

[‘After Brexit and AUKUS’: Twitter-inspired collective writing on geopolitics of an emerging multipolar world](#), a discussion between Michael A. Peters, Alexander Means, David Neilson, Georgina Tuari Stewart, Petar Jandrić, Sean Sturm, Ben Green, Derek Ford, Steve Fuller, Liz Jackson, and Eryong Xue, *Education Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 55 (2023) pp. 1322-1328

For examples of how the two disciplines merge in my work

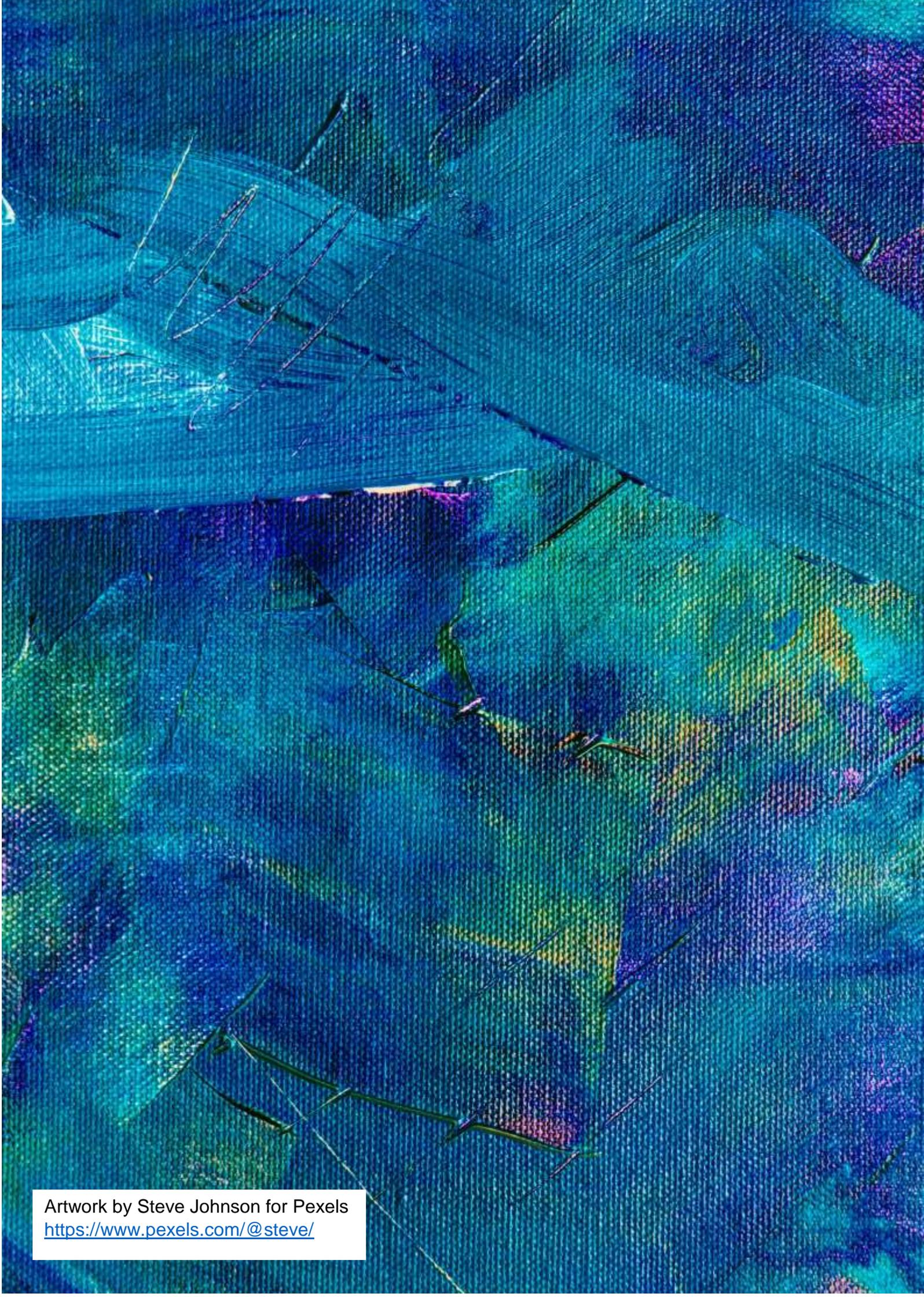
Chapter 3 Jian'ai and Chapter 5 Shoshin from [Internationalising the University a Spiritual Approach](#), Palgrave Macmillan (2019)

“You Don’t Build Bridges to Safe and Familiar Territories”: Study Abroad Practice Based in Reconciliation as Falling Apart - [Part I](#), [Part II](#) and [Part III](#), *Critical Internationalisation Studies Review* Vol. 2 No. 1 (2023)

Why I use an International Education podcast to teach International Relations, FreshEd podcast Recommended Feature (forthcoming)



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