

**Discipline Guide:
(Engaged)
Anthropology**

**Written by
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**Research with
International Students**

About the author



Vera Spangler holds a master's degree in educational anthropology and is currently pursuing a PhD in sociology at the University of Surrey, UK. Her research focuses on knowledge legitimacy and the role of international student mobility in the re/production of global hierarchies through a cross-national study spanning the UK, Denmark, and Germany. The project is anchored in ethnographic fieldwork and employs different participatory and creative methods.

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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 with the aim of encouraging more interdisciplinary thinking.

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Call for engagement

Anthropology focuses on understanding how people live, interact, and make sense of their worlds, examining everything from daily practices to larger systems of belief, economy, and politics across different cultures and times (Eriksen, 2020). Anthropologists study 'life on the ground', study globally, 'study up' (Nader, 2018), or study major fields like health care, education, technology, and government policy, often investigating how local events or micro-social situations are influenced by larger economic and political forces (Eriksen & Nielsen, 2013). Anthropologists bring a unique perspective by focusing on the details of social interactions within these broader systems, analysing how meaning is created through language, symbols, and culture (Low & Merry, 2010). Anthropology (similar to other disciplines such as sociology and education) emphasises the importance of context, history, and the specific circumstances of each situation. Since the discipline's emergence in the early 20th century, the focus on ethnographic fieldwork and the use of participant observation as a central method have sparked ongoing and intense debates about how anthropologists should interact with, participate in, and engage in the world they study. In ethnographic fieldwork, the concept of participation is inherently ambiguous. Immersing oneself in people's daily lives and taking part in their routines offers valuable insights to the ethnographer, but it also raises dilemmas and tensions regarding the researcher's moral obligations and responsibilities towards the participants (Madden, 2017).

As Nielsen and Jørgensen (2018) outline, debates on using participatory methods in community development work have greatly impacted the discipline and prompted a critical examination of who benefits from anthropological knowledge and how it is used. Around the mid-20th century, when 'development' became part of the colonial agenda, anthropologists introduced ideas about involving local communities, but this often reinforced the assumption that these communities were stable, uniform, and easily managed. After the colonies gained independence in the 1960s, anthropology faced major criticism for its role in colonialism and for promoting an

essentialised and ahistorical view of 'native' culture and community. In the 1980s, university-based anthropologists, especially in the USA, began focusing more on involving the people they studied in the research process. Influenced by postmodern ideas, they recognised issues with how anthropologists represented others and held authority over their work. They pushed for more self-awareness in anthropology and found new ways to include the voices of the people they worked with during fieldwork. This shift, known as the 'reflexive turn', has both inspired and drawn criticism in recent discussions about making anthropology more involved and participatory.

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on making anthropology more 'engaged' - a shift that has also occurred in fields like sociology (e.g., Kleidman, 2006). This approach advocates for scholarship that contributes directly to social and political change, aiming to have a greater impact beyond academia. This shift is redefining the roles of both the anthropologists and the communities they study. There is a push to move away from the belief that academic anthropology should be 'pure' or 'neutral'. Instead, more focus is being placed on 'applied' anthropology, which aims to solve real-world problems outside of academic settings (Nielsen & Jørgensen, 2018). The call for engagement has brought together anthropologists who believe anthropology needs to rethink its methods and writing to create a more respectful relationship with the people they study, those focused on avoiding an imperialist or dominating approach, and those working to develop more equal and cooperative ways of working with communities (Low & Merry, 2010). Personally, my interest in engaged anthropology stems from a commitment to a practice that respects human dignity and rights and contributes to social justice. The purpose of this discipline guide is, thus, to encourage deeper reflection on different dimensions of anthropological engagement and its impact on both society and the practice of anthropology, particularly in research involving international students.

I will start by examining various practices within engaged anthropology, focusing on the ongoing debate regarding the balance between active participation in and study

of social issues, and the ethical and impact considerations of such involvement. This discussion will cover how engaged participatory research can foster collaboration with communities and promote co-creation of knowledge, including writing for a broader audience beyond academia. Finally, I will connect these ideas to engaged participatory research with international students, noting some considerations for planning such projects and highlighting the importance of critically reflecting on the researcher's positionality.

Engaged participation

Engaged anthropology can include a wide range of practices, such as advocacy, activism, collaborative projects on representation, as well as applied work through joint partnerships and projects. It is important to recognise and understand its various forms and meanings. What is perceived as 'engaged' varies not only a personal level but also across the literature. With focus on anthropological participatory research, there are, for instance, activist researchers who have supported aligning with (and not just studying) the political struggles of certain groups and social justice movements (e.g., Hale, 2006; Kirsch, 2002; Lyon-Callo & Hyatt, 2003; Scheper-Hughes, 1995), while feminist anthropologists (e.g., Craven & Davis, 2013; Dyrness, 2008) challenge previous anthropological ways of representing and 'othering' people, with a focus on issues like inequality, diversity, and intersectionality. The goal is to study topics that are socially and politically important to the communities being researched, with a focus on empowering marginalised 'others'. Certain scholars call for more publicly engaged anthropology (e.g., Bringa & Bendixsen, 2016; Eriksen, 2020), and others put the question of partnership and collaboration (e.g., Lassiter, 2005; Levitt & Merry, 2009; Stull, 2019) in the centre of an engaged approach. Nevertheless, ethnographic participatory research brings the challenge of finding a balance between, on one hand, conducting research that deconstructs and complicates the identities of various groups to deepen anthropological understanding, and, on the other hand, supporting and empowering those groups in their

struggle for social justice (Nielsen & Jørgensen, 2018). There is a dilemma about how much a researcher should participate, such as getting involved in activism to promote social justice, versus remaining a neutral observer who only records what they see. Some people argue that participating can alter the society being studied and question whether it is ethical to try to change others' ways of life. Others argue that ignoring the need for change is itself unethical. The debate over how and how much anthropologists should seek to make changes is ongoing and unresolved (Low & Merry, 2010).

A research design focused on engagement and participation nevertheless helps move away from the traditional roles of the lone ethnographer and the observed subjects. Participatory research promotes direct collaboration with the people involved, treating them as partners in the process. What I find key about this form of engagement is that it not only fosters various types of collective processes but also encourages more participatory knowledge co-creation. Larsen et al. (2022) have noted that these types of engagements often require shifts in both ontology and epistemology, acknowledging different ways of knowing and being as essential to the process of creating knowledge. While anthropology has long been involved in addressing social issues and critiquing structures that oppress individuals and groups, engagement is changing how anthropologists conduct fieldwork, collaborate with other scholars and the communities they study, and consider both public and academic audiences (Low & Merry, 2010). This also involves deciding whether to write primarily for a specialised academic group or to make ideas accessible to a broader audience. The goal is to challenge the politics of knowledge and address unequal power dynamics on various levels which might then include publishing in local languages and using alternative communication methods to reach relevant stakeholders (Larsen et al., 2022). Engagement can help amplify underrepresented voices, leading to more participatory knowledge creation and even opportunities for co-authorship. It requires thinking critically not just about what we write but also about our own position and broader social relationships, both within and outside academia. Engagement involves creating shared spaces and collaborative processes where participatory practices and relationships can thrive and various forms of co-creation with partners are supported.

Engaged participatory research with international students

Adopting an engaged anthropological approach in researching with international students would enable us, as researchers, to work alongside our participants, fostering critical reflexivity and awareness together. By creating participatory spaces that highlight the students' perspectives, practices, and ways of knowing, we can help dismantle unjust power structures and contribute positively to social change, action, and collaborative knowledge creation. This approach also involves promoting reflexivity among students by encouraging them to reflect on their own international experiences, while providing the necessary time and support for this process. In doing so, the interaction transforms into a collaborative effort between participants and researchers in constructing the data, rather than merely collecting it (Nada, 2024). A key first step when starting research with international students is carefully considering the topics we explore. In taking an engaged participatory approach, the focus should not be solely on identifying gaps in the literature, but on understanding and addressing the real challenges that matter to the specific community. The aim is to explore topics that hold social and political significance for the communities being studied, with an emphasis on empowering marginalised groups. This perspective should also guide the design of the research project, particularly when choosing methods. Notably, most studies on international students and their experiences rely on traditional methods like surveys and semi-structured interviews. Critical methodological considerations for creating more inclusive and ethical research approaches with international students involve designing and/or choosing methods that give emphasis to the students' own practices and understandings, while valuing and acknowledging their individual capabilities and knowledges (see resources [here](#)).

I suggest that engaged anthropology provides a crucial perspective on power relations and supports multiple positionalities beyond traditional academic neutrality, for example as advocate (Hastrup & Elsass, 1990; Kirsch, 2002), activist (Chari & Donner,

2010; Schultz, 2014) or policymaker (Lopez et al., 2011). This involves taking a more nuanced approach to understanding one's own researcher positionality, recognising its dynamic and situational aspects. It requires moving beyond simplistic or fixed representations of the researcher, such as nationality, age, or gender. Researchers must engage in reflexivity, continuously negotiating and adapting their positionality across various settings, with different people, and over time. We need to engage in situational understandings of positionality by reflecting on how it has influenced the construction of knowledge throughout all stages of the research process - from study design and data collection to analysis and writing. Critically engaging with positionality involves acknowledging the multiple identities of both the researcher and participants, and how these identities influence behaviour in different contexts. In such way, researchers can discover new ways to co-construct meaning with participants, valuing students' unique abilities and knowledge and highlighting their own perspectives and practices (Adriansen & Spangler, 2024; Spangler, 2023). At this point, it is important to recognise and encourage reflective practices (e.g., journaling) regarding the 'emotional weight' that research can entail when sharing experiences and intimate knowledge with participants. This is particularly relevant given the increasing number of postgraduate studies led by international students themselves in the current phase of research.

My vision for an engaged anthropology with international students is rooted in critiques of power, inequality, and domination, aiming to foster social transformation, new possibilities and imagine alternative futures. Researchers can employ ethnography and engaged participatory methods in diverse ways to collaborate with various kinds of international student communities. The real issue is not whether to engage, but with whom, under what conditions, and with what results. Through this guide, I aim to encourage an engaged, thorough and reflective anthropological approach to working with international students. This approach should embrace different perspectives, ways of knowing, and forms of expression while carefully considering the conditions and outcomes of the engagement.

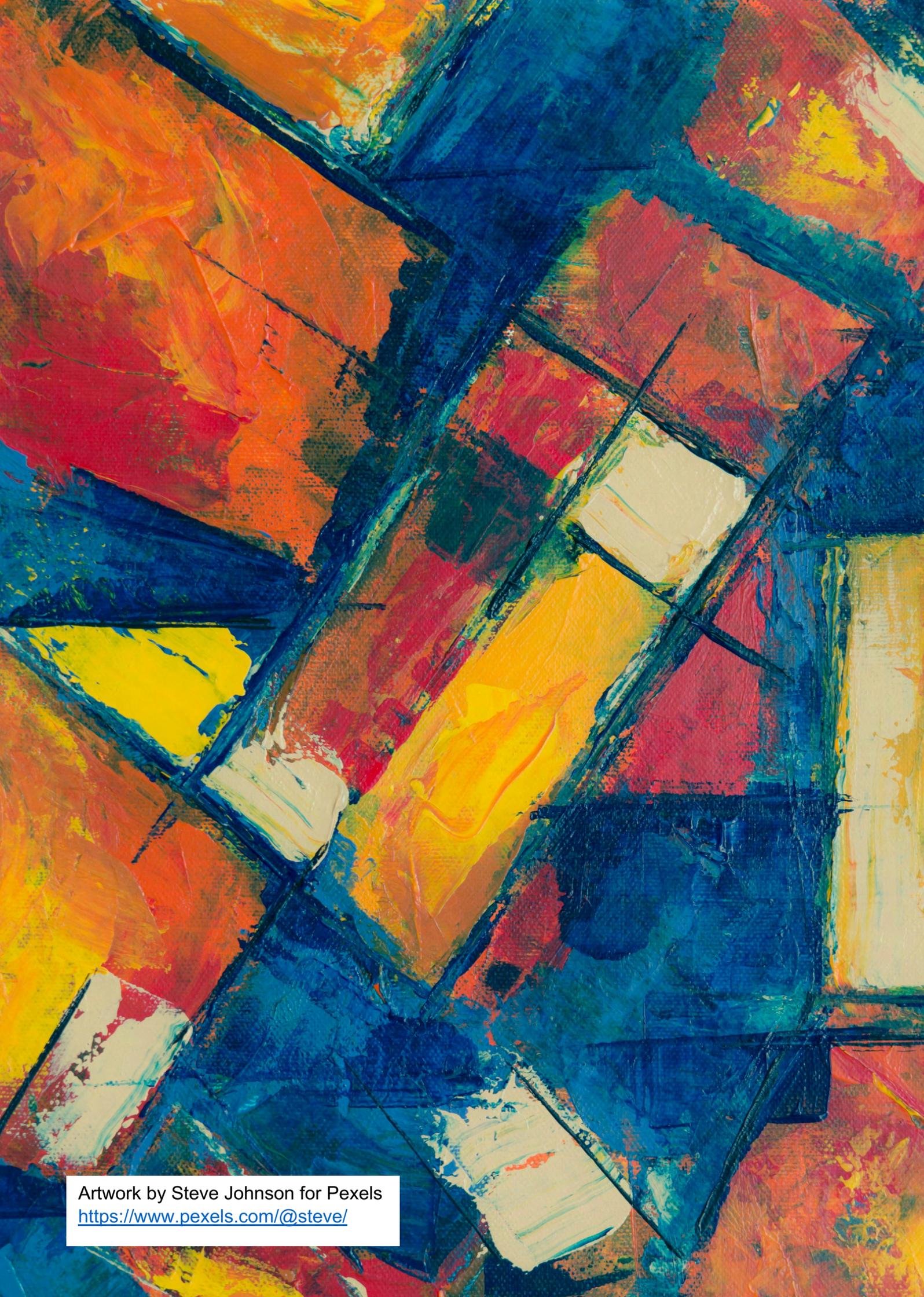
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