



Cameron, L. M., Mitchell, R., Lalli, G., & Bartram, B. (2023). Taking a global perspective: The nature and value of comparative and international education (CIE) in UK universities. In *Understanding Education Studies: Critical Issues and New Directions* (1 ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003296935-11>

Peer reviewed version

License (if available):  
CC BY

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.4324/9781003296935-11](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003296935-11)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)  
PDF-document

This is the accepted author manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Routledge at <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003296935>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

## University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

### General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

**Chapter title: Taking a global perspective: The nature and value of Comparative and International Education (CIE) in UK universities**

**Leanne Cameron, Education Development Trust**

ORCID: 0000-0002-6262-042X

**Rafael Mitchell, University of Bristol**

ORCID: 0000-0002-4553-2487

**Gurpinder Lalli, University of Wolverhampton**

ORCID: ORCID: 0000-0002-7493-4813

**Brendan Bartram, University of Wolverhampton**

ORCID: 0000-0001-8281-3002

Leanne Cameron holds a PhD in Education from the University of Bristol, and her research to date has focused on teacher professionalism, English language teaching and language-in-education policy in sub-Saharan Africa, and pedagogical change. She currently works as a Senior Consultant with Education Development Trust.

Rafael Mitchell is a lecturer in Comparative and International Education at the University of Bristol, with a special focus on African and low- and middle-income countries. His research and teaching addresses processes of schooling and school improvement for disadvantaged groups, and inequalities in knowledge production on education.

Gurpinder Lalli holds a PhD in Education from the University of Leicester, and his research focuses on the sociology of education and he is actively engaged in research on social justice and inclusion. He currently works as a Reader in Education for Social Justice and Inclusion and a member of the Education Observatory, based in the School of Education at University of Wolverhampton.

Brendan Bartram holds a PhD in Education from the University of Birmingham, and his research focuses on comparative and international education. Previously, he held the position of Reader in Education for Social Justice at the University of Wolverhampton.

**Abstract**

Comparative and international education (CIE) offers undergraduate students a perspective on education systems and contexts beyond their own direct experience. In this chapter, we introduce CIE as a field, and share an overview of what is currently taught within CIE units and modules at undergraduate level in the UK. To do so, we draw on a review of CIE units at 24 UK universities – perhaps even including your own institution, and units that you may have taken or consider taking in the future. Our findings demonstrate some key current debates within the field and push readers to think more deeply about the values, priorities and assumptions that we may take for granted in studying others' approaches to education.

**Summary Points**

- Comparative and international education provides a view into education systems worldwide, but there is ongoing debate in the discipline about what is 'international' and what should be compared.

- The survey from this chapter seeks to better understand what CIE looks like in undergraduate university programmes.
- The survey findings demonstrate that the United Kingdom and Europe in general are the most common geographic areas studied in CIE units, and less emphasis is paid to the ex-Soviet bloc and the Middle East.
- Content analysis showed that CIE units emphasise globalisation, cross-national comparison, and policy transfer but vary greatly in the aspects of education, culture, politics, and social issues that they each cover.

**Word Count** (body only): 2251 (with added question box)

---

## Introduction

From its earliest beginnings where ‘travellers’ tales’ reported on education in far-flung locales, the field of comparative and international education (CIE) has reflected human curiosity in its descriptions of education in societies considered foreign or other. As an academic field, it is relatively young, having emerging in European institutions in the early nineteenth century. The field itself has been positioned to ‘improve international understanding and awareness of other cultures and societies’ (Crossley and Watson, 2003: 14), often through study of comparative statistics, ‘rich’ qualitative descriptions, and many other methodological approaches. Even today, the shape of the field itself is in continual flux, as research continually expands what is viewed as ‘international’ and what forms are thus ‘compared’.

Within the field, efforts have been made to map the shape of CIE research itself (Davidson *et al.*, 2020; Pizmony-Levy, 2021), but less attention has been paid to the content of CIE university courses. At the end of the twentieth century, Schweisfurth (1999) provided a qualitative exploration of four UK comparative and international education (CIE) university course offerings. Building on from that work, in September 2020, we issued a call through various professional and social networks, requesting that colleagues share unit handbooks for undergraduate courses which address comparative education, international education and/or globalisation. In response, we received 40 handbooks from 24 universities. We categorised the universities as either ‘pre-1992’ or ‘post-1992’. Post-1992 universities are those polytechnics and other institutions that received university status from the Further and Higher Education Act 1992; they are sometimes called ‘new’ or ‘modern’ universities as well. We decided to use this categorisation to systemically explore CIE education and examine if university status impacts what is taught within the discipline. From the total of 24 universities, nine were pre-1992 institutions and 15 were post-1992. A thematic review of the handbooks was supplemented by interviews conducted with seven CIE teachers from four pre-1992 and three post-1992 institutions.

As an undergraduate student, why care about the nature of education outside your own context? Especially for more generalist education degrees, preparing students for future careers in UK schools, the study of other educational systems, approaches, and theories may feel like a needless digression. Answers to this question often feature in the coursebooks documents that we reviewed, and they are many: to understand the

backgrounds of an increasingly multi-national UK school-aged population, to contextualise and question practices that are taken for granted within the UK school system, to expand one's horizons and engage in global citizenship. The field offers an entry point into diverse work environments, informing careers in research, education management, international development, international relations, and beyond.

In relation to our research, some might question the value of auditing what is being taught within CIE units. Surely the study of education in *any* other contexts has some value for future educators. To this proposition, we would point to the social movements of the 2020s, which have kicked off a broad reckoning with what is taught across UK higher education institutions. Undergraduate degrees, by their nature, often provide a broad introduction to an academic field and often present a taken-for-granted 'canon' of coursework seen as foundational for understanding the areas of interest, debate and approaches within that field. As such, and perhaps in contrast with later postgraduate studies, undergraduates may feel less able to question what they are being taught and why. Thus, as this chapter seeks to demonstrate, it is important to understand what is being seen as 'foundational' within the field: as the first step for a future CIE practitioner, professional, or academic, what areas of research, forms of comparison, geographic foci, and theoretical frames are being presented as 'normative' and essential? Who or what is being foregrounded, valued, and lauded, and who or what is being diminished or reduced?

#### ***Questions to consider***

1. Have you ever thought about why we focus on some topics in school and ignore others? Who do you think is making those decisions? What kind of values, politics, or reasons are working in the background?
2. Has your university undergone any curricular investigations or changes as a result of the social movements of the 2020s or postcolonial movements such as Rhodes Must Fall? What impact do you think those changes will have – for you, for students like you, or for students from other backgrounds?

#### **Chapter overview**

This brief chapter examines the nature of CIE today through this survey and is, to the best of knowledge, the first effort to systematically map and analyse what geographic regions, approaches, theories, and concepts are being foregrounded (or, conversely, deemphasised) in modern CIE programming. In the space allotted, we present only a broad sketch on the nature and purposes of CIE programming from the handbook review, with more granular detail to be found in the full report itself, alongside content from the interviews conducted (Mitchell *et al.*, 2021).

#### **Initial findings**

The 40 unit handbooks we collected from 24 universities demonstrated a broad range of what may be labelled as CIE. Two decades previously, Schweisfurth (1999: 91) noted that

CIE 'as a purely academic course is becoming almost non-existent' but still, 'fragments of the content and methodology of the field continue to permeate other education department programmes at several institutions.' A similar thread is evident in our dataset: the unit handbooks came from varied education-related degrees and ranged from 'general' CIE offerings (e.g. multiple units entitled 'Comparative Education' or 'Globalisation and Education') to course titles that denoted specific emphasis on children, poverty, technology, inequality, special needs, or a particular region of the world. There was also great variety in the documents themselves, ranging from 2-page formulaic course overviews to lengthy, detailed module guides with weekly topics, readings, assignments, and questions for discussion.

Unit handbooks were analysed and coded via a content analysis process. First, all documents were also coded for geographic references, with all country references tabulated. Geographic focus varied across units, but there were some clear findings from the data. Ten of the 40, or 25 per cent, did not specifically reference any specific country or region, as with one module which was aimed at 'those students interested in exploring the influence of globalisation on educational provision.' Other units that fell within this categorisation demonstrated the limitations of coding for specific countries: other codes suggested specific geographic focus. Reference to 'OECD', 'World Bank', and 'policy transfer' provide understanding of the probable regions or nations that will be covered or referenced within the class.

For the remaining 75 per cent that did reference countries for study, our review noted a strong emphasis on European nations, appearing in 29 out of 40 unit handbooks, with the UK the most represented country, found in 17 and Germany second, found in 8. Indeed, for the UK in particular, we surmised that the number was likely higher: the UK, like the US, often does not have a country signifier in the title as both nations often function as a 'starting point' for comparison. In 15 handbooks, the UK was contrasted with unnamed 'global' or 'international' contexts 'abroad' or with those spaces where 'global inequalities' operate.

Beyond Europe, Asia and the Pacific, including Australia, was the second most represented region, with a tally of 19, and Africa was third, with 15. The remaining regions were North America (12), Latin America (nine), and the Middle East (none). We noted that country size did not necessarily correlate with coverage: Brazil, for example, only appeared in one reading list, and China, the most populous country and the home of the largest international student population studying in the UK, has just five. The results also demonstrated that little to no attention is paid to ex-Soviet countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and Russia was referenced by only one coursebook. Again, there were limitations to this approach, as we failed to adequately capture indigenous and boundary-less movements, or those which crossed national borders.

Following geographic mapping, each handbook was assigned between six and 20 keywords based on the content of the document, with the keywords coming from a standardised code set that was developed inductively through the cataloguing process. After the initial assessment, the code set was examined by other team members and similar terms were

collapsed; the documents were reviewed twice more as the code set was reduced and revised. A final code set consisted of 86 terms.

For readers unfamiliar with the field of CIE, the content mapping that we present here gives an overview of some of the keywords and themes that have occupied CIE researchers. The first three codes give a clear introduction to topics that matter most within our work: *globalisation* (coded for 28 handbooks), *cross-national comparison* (25), and *policy transfer* (20). As a code, *globalisation* captured references to trends, including increased contact between nations, shifts in international mobility, the emergence of the global marketplace, etc. It also reflects how higher education – UK universities in particular – have increasingly diverse international student populations and often position themselves as producing ‘global citizens’ and graduates able to communicate and operate across global contexts. The second code, *cross-national comparison*, is strongly related to approaches used in this field, and reflects the intended learning outcomes of some units, for example: ‘[students will] be conversant in a range of frameworks and methods that can be used to make comparisons in education.’ *Policy transfer*, another term used commonly in the field itself, included references to education policies being intentionally borrowed or imposed. This relates to ideas about education – what pedagogies are ‘best’, how to prepare teachers, how to use technology, etc. – that may emerge in one country and then implemented in others, for better or worse. These three codes included general references with more detailed aspects of each (specific policy statements, like the large global propositions such as Sustainable Development Goals and Education for All, or spaces of specific comparison, like league tables and international large-scale assessments) separately tallied, as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1. Thematic areas from CIE unit handbooks with five or more references.**

Key term	Tally	Key term	Tally
globalisation	28	league tables	7
cross-national comparison	25	pedagogy	7
policy transfer	20	Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)	7
gender	14	UNESCO	7
inequalities	14	human rights	6
Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	14	Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)	6
children/youth	12	neoliberalism	6
culture	11	teachers	6
higher education	11	alternative education	5
development	10	capability theory	5
Education for All (EFA)	10	children's rights	5
postcolonial/decolonial perspectives	10	conflict	5

race	10	international large-scale assessments	5
inclusion	9	internationalisation	5
poverty	9	primary/secondary education	5
OECD	8	social change	5
social justice	8	sustainable education	5
International non-government organisations (INGOs)/international government organisations (IGOs)	7		

Grouped into primary themes, the codes provide an overview of the content presented in undergraduate CIE programming in the UK. Handbooks indicate ongoing emphasis on forms and levels of education (e.g. primary school, higher education, Montessori, etc.), the characteristics or key aspects of students populations being studied (e.g. SEND, class, rurality, etc.), and aspects related to teachers, curriculum, and pedagogy (e.g. language in education, technology, teacher education, etc.). Comparative approaches, as tools within the CIE discipline, and theories specific to the field are also foregrounded (e.g. issue-based approaches, capability theory, human capital, etc.). Globalisation, including the transfer of global policies and the work of multinational agencies, donors, and banks, along with development (SDGs, inequalities, philanthropy, etc.).

### Discussion of findings

When examined together, the geographic and coding data suggest initial findings. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the coding and geographic mapping indicate the ongoing overlaps between CIE and development studies. With a few exceptions, the data demonstrates that lower income countries, specifically those in Africa, were collocated with social issues such as conflict, poverty, and inequality. In one example from a Year Two post-1992 course, a content description notes that a guest lecturer will discuss their 'research in Tanzania on girls and disability.' Comparison of overall *systems* tended to occur between the UK and high income, European nations, where the national educational approach was examined rather than that nation functioning as a case study for some specific societal ill. Though there were a few examples where Chinese, Japanese, and Cuban models of education were explored at a systems level, high income countries such as those in Scandinavia and Western Europe, were more commonly presented as complete 'systems' for comparison with the UK, as with this content description from a Year Two post-1992 course: 'Comparing schools, teachers & teacher education – culturally situated concepts, France, Denmark, England. Evaluating lessons for France?' However, there were some exceptions to this high income/low income split, including an entire course focused on education inequalities in higher income countries. Further, the coding did indicate a growing emphasis on postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, which appeared in ten (25 per cent) of the handbooks, which would presumably question why inequalities and such are being relegated to lower income country status.

In sum, this survey indicates myriad directions for more research into current CIE teaching in the UK. For undergraduates, this exploration provides some context in understanding the content of these units and potential assignments; it helps to contextualise what universities might mean when they say that they prepare students to be ‘global citizens’ or ‘internationally-aware.’ In deepening our understanding what content is being foregrounded – and what geographic regions, approaches, theories, and concepts in CIE education, we can have a better understanding of the foundations provided to those entering the field, foundations which establish normative frames that underpin the values, assumptions, and areas of research for the field in the years to come.

#### **Questions to consider**

1. What are some likely reasons why the UK is emphasised in so many of the units surveyed? Are there issues or problems that might appear with foregrounding the UK?
2. Descriptions of CIE have labelled it as everything from multidisciplinary and diverse (Crossley and Watson, 2003) to ‘chaotic and disjointed’ (Pizmony-Levy, 2021: 447), and, as we have seen in this chapter, there are overlaps with other fields such as development studies. What are the opportunities and the challenges for a disciplinary field that has strong ties with other disciplinary fields?
3. If this same research was conducted fifty years ago, it would likely show a very different picture of CIE education. Is it necessary for a field like CIE to grow, evolve, and change its areas of focus? Why or why not?

#### **Suggested readings**

**Phillips, D., Schweisfurth, M., & Phillips, D. (2017)** Comparative and International Education: An introduction to theory, method, and practice. In *International and Comparative Education: Contemporary issues and debates* (2nd ed., pp. 1–6). London: Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315563091> ]

If you are just getting interested in Comparative and International Education, this book provides an excellent starting point; it even appeared in multiple reading lists from the unit handbooks discussed in our article. The book dives deep into many of the themes introduced here, including forms of educational comparison, globalisation, and the many social, historical, economic, and cultural influences upon education in different systems worldwide.

**Pizmony-Levy, O. (2021)** Social Network Theory and Analysis in Comparative and International education: Connecting the dots for better understanding of education. In T. D. Jules, R. Shields, & M. A. M. Thomas (Eds.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Theory in Comparative and International Education* (pp. 447–458). London: Bloomsbury.

**Commented [LC1]:** As suggested readings are not supposed to be included in the Reference list, I added the references here to make clear what source is being referenced (as ‘Phillips and Schweisfurth, 2017 might include multiple sources)



Mentioned in our piece, this book chapter provides a mapping of the many diverse areas of study that fall under the CIE banner. The author uses social network theory to analyse the members and institutions that belong to Special Interest Groups (SIGs) within the North America-based professional group, the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) to comment on an issue that we briefly touch on: the narrow focus on nation states within the CIE field.

**McCowan, T., & Unterhalter, E. (Eds.) (2015)** *Education and International Development: An introduction*. London: Bloomsbury.

This edited book provides an accessible overview to the field of education and international development, presenting a number of the key actors, funders, institutions, theories, policies, and practices that underpin education systems and projects primarily in the Global South.

## References

- Crossley, M., & Watson, K. (2003) *Comparative and International Research in Education: Globalisation, context and difference*. London: Routledge.
- Davidson, P. M., Dzotsinedze, N., Park, M. F., & Wiseman, A. W. (2020) Themes of Diversity, Comparison, and Contextualisation over Compare's History. *Compare*, **50**(8), pp. 1086–1103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1831160>
- Mitchell, R., Lalli, G., Cameron, L., & Bartram, B. (2021) *Teaching Comparative and International Education in the UK: A national survey of undergraduate programmes* (CIRE & Education Observatory Working Paper). Bristol & Wolverhampton: University of Bristol & University of Wolverhampton. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5148194>
- Pizmony-Levy, O. (2021) Social Network Theory and Analysis in Comparative and International education: Connecting the dots for better understanding of education. In T. D. Jules, R. Shields, & M. A. M. Thomas (Eds.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Theory in Comparative and International Education* (pp. 447–458). London: Bloomsbury.
- Schweisfurth, M. (1999) Resilience, Resistance and Responsiveness: Comparative and international education at United Kingdom universities. In R. Alexander, P. Broadfoot, & D. Phillips (Eds.), *Learning from Comparing: New directions in comparative educational research. Contexts, classrooms and outcomes* (pp. 89–102). London: Symposium.