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Epistemic Parochialism: Single Institution Studies in The Age of Artificial Intelligence Large Language Models

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Abstract

Learning and teaching scholarship is experiencing a growing tension between increasing global interconnectedness and the persistent production of highly decontextualised local studies. This Editorial argues that such epistemic parochialism limits our ability to build cumulative knowledge and risks reinforcing narrow solutions to shared problems. Drawing on contemporary pressures including internationalisation, epistemic monocultures, system-level complexity, and the rapid integration of artificial intelligence large language models, the Editorial outlines why research that treats the institution as the horizon of inquiry is no longer adequate. In an era where large language models learn from, reproduce, and amplify scholarship, narrowly framed or duplicative studies have implications not only for academic discourse but also for the quality of language models. To address this challenge, the Editorial presents five principles to guide authors in producing better situated research: reframing the problem beyond the institution; developing a credible inquiry into existing knowledge; justifying methodological positioning; situating institutional cases within complex systems; and synthesising localised insights to advance global knowledge. By adopting these principles, authors strengthen the relevance, clarity and impact of their work, enhance their prospects for publishing success, and help safeguard the coherence and diversity of the knowledge on which both human scholars and artificial intelligence systems increasingly depend. The Editorial concludes with a call for the sector to recognise epistemic parochialism as a significant contemporary peril and to collectively pursue scholarship that is reflective, situated and globally engaged.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Scholarship of learning and teaching must be situated within the wider national and global landscape to ensure practical relevance beyond immediate context
2. Select methods for scholarship that fit the problem, rather than convention or convenience.
3. Ensure the proposed inquiry meaningfully adds to the body of knowledge with space for genuine originality.

Keywords

Epistemology, higher education, research methods, methodology, credibility, context.

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Introduction

The *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* has continued to evolve in recent years from an outlet that published primarily practice-based and applied studies to one increasingly focused on robust, evidence-informed analyses of learning and teaching. Since joining Scopus and Web of Science in the late 2010s, the journal's boundaries have broadened well beyond Australia, and we now receive manuscripts from across the world. This global expansion has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my role as Editor-in-Chief, and has afforded the opportunity to glimpse the lives, systems, and commitments of international colleagues through their scholarship.

Across the thousands of manuscripts that have crossed my desk in recent years, a striking pattern has emerged. Many studies, often from very different institutions and countries, are in fact remarkably similar. In the past three months alone, JUTLP reviewed four separate evaluations of a specific embedded academic development module, each positioned as a distinctive institutional response to a local need. Yet each began with the same assumption that the intervention was necessary, important, and innovative, without first establishing this claim for an international readership. As we argued in the 2024 editorial on problematisation (Purvis et al., 2024), high-quality scholarship begins not with institutional strategy documents but with a clear, well-evidenced problem in the international literature. Despite this, we continue to receive manuscripts whose problem statements are deeply local, even when the problems they describe are plainly global in nature.

In preparing this Editorial, I reflected on my own habits as a predominantly quantitative researcher. Post-positivist approaches often aim to disconfirm prior assumptions and generate findings that generalise across settings. This is an orientation that can lend itself to scalable clarity. Qualitative and case-based research, however, offer forms of insight aimed at transferrable rich knowledge. The issue, therefore, is not with case studies, single-site inquiries, or diverse methodological traditions. The higher education discipline is uniquely placed to enable central learning and teaching departments and the discipline scholar seeking to develop their teaching practice through scholarship. Rather, the challenge lies in studies that begin, investigate and conclude entirely within one institutional microcosm, without situating that case in relation to what is already known.

Evidence-based practice requires stronger grounding. Research must begin with a clear articulation of the problem and a genuine inquiry into how that problem has been understood elsewhere, and that siloes organised by jurisdiction or publication source necessarily need to be deconstructed (Tight, 2007, 2018). Only then can a local context serve as an appropriate site in which to explore or test a possible solution whether through a qualitative case, a mixed-methods design, or large-scale learning analytics across multiple institutions. This Editorial examines why so many studies remain bounded in this way, the macro-level shifts that make such approaches increasingly insufficient, and how authors might position their work to contribute meaningfully to a global field.

Epistemological Crisis: Why Local Studies Are Not Enough

Higher education research is experiencing a subtle but significant epistemological crisis. As the volume of published work expands, the field struggles to synthesise insights, build cumulative knowledge, and establish coherent theoretical trajectories; despite higher education's perpetual challenge with its core theories (Tight, 2004). The result is scholarship that is increasingly fragmented, with many studies (particularly those that focus exclusively on local, institutional problems) operating in isolation from broader disciplinary conversations.

Epistemic Monoculture

The field is witnessing an unintended proliferation of near-identical studies, differentiated by a jurisdictional line alone (e.g., COVID-19, generative AI). Plantade-Gipch et al. (2025) offer a good example of recent comparative work that values two localised contexts. Interventions that appear innovative at the institutional level repeatedly emerge in manuscript submissions, often without awareness that similar work has already been published elsewhere. These are sadly, not deliberate replications or attempts at transferability (a much-needed addition to higher education, in response to what psychologists argue is a replication crisis: Shrout & Rodgers, 2018). They are parallel local accounts of the same kinds of problems, presented as standalone contributions, without genuine acknowledgment of their similarity to existing studies. Instead of strengthening the field through purposeful comparison or cumulative inquiry, this pattern saturates the literature without advancing synthesis.

This is a form of epistemic monoculture. It arises when researchers treat their institution as the horizon of inquiry rather than as one site within a global ecosystem of knowledge. When the institution becomes the frame through which a problem is defined, explored and explained, the resulting contribution remains bounded by that context. The work may be meaningful locally, but it rarely builds on or challenges what is known more broadly or extends what is already known.

The claim of an epistemic monoculture is not a critique of case studies or institutional specificity. Local contexts remain an essential lens for understanding practice. The challenge is when local inquiry is not situated within the broader body of knowledge from which it might draw or to which it might contribute. Without that positioning, studies risk becoming isolated accounts rather than part of a shared conversation. The field moves sideways rather than forward.

I often hope that it is Editors, whose inboxes are typically overflowing with new manuscripts, that see these duplicates and send them on their way. Yet, as I have tracked through in some of my earliest of rejections. Most of the manuscripts we reject in JUTLP find their way to a new home, often with minimal change or attending to the primary limitation surrounding its decontextualised construction. This is not to devalue the work of other journals, but rather to highlight a broader systemic pattern in which manuscripts can progress without the level of contextual refinement that would benefit both authors and the field.

Narrow Artificial Intelligence Scraping and Training Data

The rapid rise of generative AI is shaping how academics and students locate information, synthesise research and make decisions. These systems are increasingly used to surface relevant scholarship and, at times, to answer quick and far smaller questions such as whether my dog can safely eat a carrot; a task once reserved for asking the Google Home midway through dicing the carrot. Regardless of the scale of inquiry, large language models depend entirely on the quality of the knowledge they are trained on. Their reliability rests on the strength, diversity and coherence of the literature they ingest.

Recent work in the AI and data science communities highlights just how sensitive these systems are to the quality of their training inputs. In a recent *Nature Medicine* study, an extremely small proportion of corrupted or low-quality data within a training set is evidenced as capable of distorting model performance in ways that human evaluators and standard benchmarks are likely to fail to detect (Alber et al., 2025). If the underlying corpus contains duplication, narrow perspectives or poorly contextualised material, the resulting model internalises those weaknesses. The model reproduces the structure of the knowledge base it is fed.

> *We find that replacement of just 0.001% of training tokens with medical misinformation results in harmful models more likely to propagate medical errors. Furthermore, we discover that corrupted models match the performance of their corruption-free counterparts on open-source benchmarks routinely used to evaluate medical LLMs* (Alber et al., 2025, p. 618)

In the social sciences, LLMs that are trained on large swathes of un-curated data risk amplifying already-existing epistemic weaknesses. When models rely heavily on text that is homogeneous, shallow or repetitive, their outputs become correspondingly limited (Rossi et al., 2024); particularly in cases of perpetuating hegemonic bias (Newstead et al., 2024). The concern is not only that these models may generate factually incorrect answers, but that they may reinforce the structural patterns of the corpus itself. Weakness in the literature becomes weakness in these model that are increasingly used for making simple and life-changing decisions. Yao et al. (2024) reinforce this point in their survey of LLM reliability. They note that model performance is significantly influenced by patterns of duplication, poor provenance, and uneven representation across subject domains. A training dataset that lacks diversity or conceptual depth leads to models that appear authoritative but rest on a fragile informational substrate. These models give the impression of synthesis while in fact recycling the narrow contours of their training data. And in a global knowledge economy, larger and more established countries and institutions have their data privileged by a rapid publish-or-perish of small-scale quick publications that offer duplication (and thus a second source in training data) rather than extension of the field.

The emergence knowledge management literature on genAI should offer us pause as a higher education community. While I see huge opportunity for machine learning and AI in our research (e.g., Crawford et al., 2024a, 2024b), it is important that these are measured against training risk. If our field continues to be saturated with institution-bound studies that largely replicate each other's assumptions and designs, generative AI systems will learn those patterns and reproduce them at scale. At the same time, AI-assisted synthesis makes it easier than ever to map existing work, identify gaps, and to position forthcoming studies in a way that extends rather than duplicates. These tools should be used to ensure the avoidance of duplication at the inception and design phase, and to ensure that similar studies are found and contextualised in the discussion of how their local insights engage with wider conversations. With this support, small-scale or practice-based inquiries should continue to form a key foundation of a stronger and more coherent knowledge base. The argument made here is not dismissive or opposed to localised and small-scale studies; but rather a position against those studies that lack deep context, careful situating, and intentionality. The quality of the future knowledge environment will mirror the quality of the research we contribute today. Rigorous, globally informed and well-situated learning and teaching research is therefore not only a scholarly responsibility but a foundational component of the epistemic infrastructure upon which future AI systems will rely. The field must provide models with rich, connected, and well-theorised knowledge rather than a collection of isolated accounts.

Decolonisation of Knowledge

The movement to decolonise knowledge has drawn attention to how academic fields define, validate and circulate ideas. A consistent finding in this literature is that knowledge produced within a single context is rarely sufficient without being located within the wider historical, cultural and epistemic systems that shape its meaning. In higher education research, studies that begin and end within one institution risk presenting their local perspective as inherently distinctive, even when the challenges described are shared across many settings (Mbembe, 2016), that is the call Mbembe (2016, p. 41) made. That "we therefore need to reconfigure our understanding of our own situatedness in Africa and the world and stop thinking in South-African-centric terms". I read this quote not as a statement that local knowledge is less important, but that without considering how it fits (or does not fit) without a global knowledge base seems to miss an opportunity to learn. Drawing on less-known and under-represented perspectives can help to challenge hegemonic and Western-centric assumptions and position such local insights within a genuinely global conversation (e.g., see Roe, 2005 for a use case with genAI).

Peer-reviewed work on decolonisation highlights the need for scholarship to move beyond inward-facing inquiry and to engage actively with global conversations about knowledge production. Decolonisation requires careful examination of how certain forms of knowledge become dominant and how others are marginalised, as well as an explicit effort to place local insights in dialogue with broader intellectual traditions. When research remains institution-bound, it may inadvertently reinforce the epistemic hierarchies that decolonisation seeks to dismantle.

> To decolonize the university is to therefore to reform it with the aim of creating a less provincial and more open critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism – a task that involves the radical *refounding* of our ways of thinking and a transcendence of our disciplinary divisions (Mbembe, 2016, p. 37).

This concern is also evident in critiques of symbolic or superficial approaches to decolonisation. Some scholars make a case that decolonisation is not a metaphor or a rhetorical gesture but a substantive restructuring of knowledge practices (Tuck & Yang, 2012). For higher education research, this involves recognising that local institutional experiences represent important knowledge, and also one expression of wider patterns, with the need for meaningful contribution through a situated practice within global bodies of evidence.

Work on epistemic injustice adds a further dimension. Hermeneutical injustice arises when a community lacks the conceptual resources to fully interpret its own experiences (Fricker, 2003). When learning and teaching research is confined to isolated local accounts, it risks limiting the field's interpretive capacity, narrowing its understanding of problems that manifest across diverse global contexts. Taken together, this scholarship underscores that local context remains essential but is never sufficient on its own. Decolonising knowledge requires higher education researchers to position institutional cases as situated contributions within a global ecology of scholarship, rather than as stand-alone accounts. This approach fosters epistemic plurality, supports more robust synthesis, and enables the field to build shared understanding across contexts.

Internationalisation

Higher education systems have become increasingly interconnected through expanding student mobility, cross-border programme delivery, and shared use of digital platforms that span national boundaries. These international lines have transformed how institutions experience global disruptions such as climate change, political polarisation, and employment distributions. These pressures produce patterns that are more convergent than divergent, with universities facing structurally similar challenges regardless of location (Marginson, 2018); a position consistent in the COVID-19 onset (Crawford et al., 2020).

Learning and teaching issues once perceived as locally specific now manifest across diverse systems. Academic integrity, student engagement, digital learning, assessment redesign and questions of belonging appear consistently in studies from regions that differ widely in language, culture and national policy, yet share common global drivers (Altbach & Knight, 2007). This body of work demonstrates that contemporary higher education challenges are rarely contained within institutional boundaries and that insights developed in one setting often have relevance elsewhere when appropriately contextualised.

I see this particularly prominently within the myriad of papers received in JUTLP that are based on a form of English language education in a countries where English is not the official, administrative, or cultural language (e.g., Plonsky, 2013). It seems there is a growth in a style of template-based research that seeks to build easily finished systematic literature reviews (see Crawford, 2025), as well as applications of existing knowledge into a marginally different context without acknowledgment of the original design. And this mistake is easy to make; we miss a key paper and produce research that is derivative with noble intentions, I hope. Yet, as rejections flow in, some continue to dive into carving a sense of significance when it might be more useful to drop the study, learn, and go again. The challenge I see with many of these studies is not that they offer confirmatory assessments of existing knowledge (e.g., a replication study), but that they replicate existing knowledge without any acknowledgement of previous work, and grandiose claims that they are significant, novel, and original.

Student learning today is shaped by globalised experiences that cut across national and institutional lines. Intercultural competence frameworks emphasise that meaningful learning environments now require awareness of how global flows of people, ideas, and technologies influence pedagogy and curriculum design (Deardorff, 2006). When research isolates institutional practice from these wider patterns, it risks overlooking the broader forces that shape student experience and academic work.

Complexity and systems thinking

Building on internationalisation, higher education does not exist in isolation. Institutions operate within complex, interconnected systems shaped by geopolitical shifts, socioeconomic inequalities, technological infrastructures, and cultural movements. Complexity theory emphasises that no institution can be understood purely through its internal characteristics, because its practices, challenges, and opportunities are continually shaped by forces operating at multiple levels from global trends to national policies to local communities (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Research that positions an institution as an island obscures these wider dynamics and risks misinterpreting problems that are fundamentally systemic rather than local.

Higher education teaching, learning, and governance are influenced by multi-level interdependencies. Curriculum reforms emerge not only from internal pedagogical concerns but also from global labour market demands, international mobility patterns, digital transformations and political pressures on the role of universities (Barnett, 2011). Studies that confine themselves to microcosmic institutional accounts often miss how these external forces shape the very issues they seek to explain. When research neglects system-level influences, it becomes difficult to understand whether a challenge is genuinely local or alternatively part of (or in contrast to) a broader pattern observed across the sector.

Complexity thinking also foregrounds the non-linear, emergent nature of educational change. Interventions rarely produce identical outcomes across settings because institutions differ in culture, history, resources, and the wider environments in which they are embedded (Morrison, 2010). Without acknowledging this interdependence, studies that attempt to argue significance from a single case risk offering conclusions that cannot travel. Or, worse, may be a form of false positive that misattributes localised causes when a broader influence is at play. Conversely, local cases become far more valuable when situated within the nested systems (i.e., global, national, sectoral) that shape their emergence.

Learning and teaching research has increasingly adopted ecological and systems-oriented perspectives that situate educational practices within broader networks of people, technologies, environments and social structures (Ellis & Goodyear, 2019). These perspectives show that student experience, academic practice and institutional culture are always the outcome of interacting influences, not isolated variables. What appears “local” in origin is often the manifestation of wider system dynamics. Taken together, complexity and systems thinking strengthen the argument that institution-bound studies must be situated within the multi-level conditions that give rise to them. Local cases still matter, but only when they illuminate the broader systems in which they are entangled. Recognising these interdependencies enables researchers to move beyond descriptive accounts of single sites and contribute to a more coherent, systemic understanding of higher education.

A Call for Better Situated Research

In the following section, I outline five principles for situating research in ways that respond to the contemporary challenge of epistemic parochialism. These principles are intended to guide authors toward producing scholarship that is rigorous, theoretically grounded and globally meaningful, while still recognising the legitimate value of institutional cases when appropriately framed. It is important to acknowledge that this Editorial extends on several contemporary editorials of impact led by Senior Editors across JUTLP, particularly on the need to situate in the age of AI (Fitzgerald et al., 2025), on ensuring quantitative methods are embedded in theory and robust analysis (Taylor et al., 2025), on good research problems and questions (Purvis et al., 2024), and on the need for evidence-based practice not just practice (Ashton-Hay et al., 2025).

Principle 1. Reframe the Problem Beyond the Institution

Research problems should first be defined at the system level (e.g., sectoral, national or global) before being framed through the lens of a single institution. This ensures readers understand the wider forces that give rise to the issue and prevents introductory sections from being dominated by internal strategy documents or context-specific rationales. Positioning the problem at this broader level makes evident why the study deserves scholarly attention (Purvis et al., 2024). Being genuine about our relationship to a problem here could mean that an investigation is not appropriate in the local context (e.g., homogeneity questions), and we must remain open in the development of our proposed front matter (e.g., introduction and literature reviews) to the idea that it may not manifest into a problem worthy of additional research, or that our own institutions are poor sites for investigation of that matter. That is, in establishing a research question first, then applying it to explore a local context second, it is possible that our specific local context is not a good site of inquiry (or that it is ideal).

Authors must also evidence that the issue they address is either unique to their context or one manifestation of a widely observed challenge in higher education. Context is important to research (Bryman et al., 1996). I imagine there are many phenomena that are unique to a small number of locations, perhaps even a single one, and even the quantitative researcher in me acknowledges their importance. When problems, regardless of their uniqueness, must be positioned as part of a larger pattern that extends beyond local organisational boundaries. Making this distinction explicit helps clarify the contribution and ensures the research question is grounded in the realities of the field rather than internal narratives. When reading opening remarks from authors, I offer two examples of a well-written opening comment and a poor one.

> **Poor example.** *Our university faces low student engagement in large first-year classes, which has prompted us to implement a new intervention aligned with our strategic plan.*
>
> **Exemplar.** *Declining engagement in large first-year cohorts is a widely observed global challenge linked to massification, digital distraction, and reduced academic preparation (cited literature).*

Framing the problem beyond the institution ultimately strengthens the meaning and relevance of the study (e.g., Smith et al., 2025). It alerts readers to how the case aligns with, or diverges from, global patterns and prevents the assumption that internal experiences are inherently distinctive (e.g., Bridges et al., 2025). Purvis and colleagues (2024) offer strong practical support for clear articulation of research problems. This broader orientation also establishes a clear rationale for why the study matters to higher education as a whole. Likewise, higher education occupies a generally unique space where the academics are also ordinarily the practitioners; it is less common for business CEOs to be dual-CEOs and full-time researchers. Many researchers in higher education also teach in their respective disciplines, so there are lower barriers to bridging a teaching-research gap (Brew, 2010). While it is important that research is conducted to improve a local experience (e.g., applying existing knowledge to our context), these action research endeavours can be conducted without the intention to be written it up as full-fledged internationally ground-breaking studies that they are not.

Principle 2. Develop a Credible Inquiry into What is Known

A well-situated study begins with an honest inquiry into how the problem has been conceptualised, theorised, and empirically examined across contexts. This involves engaging with both global and local scholarship to establish a grounded understanding of the field. Identifying these wider foundations avoids the trap of assuming a conceptual gap where none exists. Authors should then situate their work by identifying key convergences, divergences, and areas of uncertainty within the existing literature (Boote & Brew, 2005). Rather than relying on claims of novelty without evidence, researchers must demonstrate how the present study fits into or challenges what the field already knows. This ensures that the study is positioned against a genuine scholarly conversation rather than an imagined void.

It is increasingly common to receive manuscripts that assert novelty without demonstrating it. Phrases such as "*There are few studies on academic integrity in nursing programmes*" remain widespread, yet a basic keyword search in any major academic index (Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, OpenAlex) often reveals extensive empirical and conceptual work already undertaken in that area. The problem is not simply factual inaccuracy; it signals a lack of engagement with the knowledge landscape into which the study intends to intervene. A more credible and situated argument might read:

> *International research identifies three dominant factors shaping academic integrity in professional programmes: assessment design, workload pressure and disciplinary norms. Findings are mixed regarding the role of discipline-specific cultures (references). This study contributes to this debate by examining how these factors interact in a regional Australian nursing programme.*

This formulation does more than avoid overstatement. It evidences awareness of convergent findings, recognises contested areas within the literature and establishes a clear rationale for how the present study will advance the field rather than duplicate existing knowledge. Higher education must be more than an a-theoretical discipline (Tight, 2004).

The distinction between front matter and the research that follows is therefore critical. While introductions and literature reviews often evolve during the research process, decisions about research design, analytical strategy and framing should be informed by a clear understanding of what is already known before data collection or intervention planning begins. Without that foundation, studies risk generating findings that are predictable, redundant or misaligned with existing conceptual debates. A credible inquiry requires more than summarising previous work. It demands synthesising it into a coherent analytic frame that clarifies how the study's questions, methods and interpretations emerge logically from the state of knowledge. This integration provides the intellectual scaffolding that enables research to build cumulatively rather than add to the proliferation of isolated, descriptive accounts.

Finally, the process of synthesis must explicitly shape the study's anticipated contribution. Authors must show how existing theories, empirical findings, or methodological debates inform not only the framing of the research but also the interpretation of its results. This is key in studies where there is an explicit attempt to explore a well-evidenced conceptual link in a new context. For example, evaluative judgment research is strong in Australia and the United Kingdom (e.g., Bearman et al., 2024), and may be applied usefully into new non-Western and indigenous contexts; but there must be a reasonable theoretical argument for what uniqueness of context might add depth to our shared understanding of the underlying phenomena. There are many reapplications of concepts that are no longer useful (e.g., Hattie and O'Leary, 2025 on learning styles). When the literature is used to establish conceptual boundaries, identify mechanisms worth interrogating or highlight tensions that the present study can help resolve, the research becomes part of a shared scholarly project. By contrast, internationally situated literature reviews that merely enumerate prior studies without integrating them into a coherent and contextually appropriate argument fail to guide or justify the direction of the research. A well-synthesised inquiry therefore performs two simultaneous functions: it demonstrates intellectual maturity and situates the (possibly localised) study within a cumulative tradition of knowledge-building. This is the distinguishing feature of research that meaningfully contributes to theoretical development and practice, and it is a core need for strong scholarship.

Principle 3. Justify the Methodological Positioning of Site of Inquiry

Methodological decisions should emerge from the nature of the research problem and the theoretical commitments underpinning it. Too often, studies adopt methods because they are customary within a department or familiar to a research team, rather than because they provide the strongest pathway to answering the research questions. This produces methodological inertia: a reliance on inherited practices rather than intentional design. A principled justification requires authors to articulate how their chosen paradigm (whether interpretivist, post-positivist, design-based, or critical) aligns with the epistemological stance of the study and the kind of knowledge it seeks to produce. Without this alignment, there is a disconnect between the questions posed and the evidence marshalled to address them.

The research design must foreground what the chosen method uniquely enables the study to reveal, explain or challenge in the specific site of inquiry. Higher education has experienced a continued gap between the theories developed and their ways in which empirical research is undertaken (Ashwin, 2012). For example, an ethnographic approach may illuminate cultural norms or tacit practices that remain inaccessible through surveys, while a quasi-experimental design may be better suited for isolating the influence of a particular intervention on student outcomes. Local investigations are often entirely appropriate (indeed, sometimes essential) for exploring emergent phenomena, deeply contextual experiences or implementation challenges. What matters is not the locality itself but the clarity with which authors demonstrate how the method and its situated location enables an understanding of the problem and why it offers advantages over plausible alternatives. Making this logic explicit helps reviewers see the coherence between research aims, evidence generation and the knowledge contribution.

Robust methodological justification also requires authors to acknowledge the specific locational boundaries of their chosen approach. Every method includes both affordances and constraints that shape what can be inferred from the data. Qualitative studies may offer depth and nuance but cannot make population-level claims (Healy & Perry, 2000); quantitative evaluations may provide patterns but struggle to capture lived experience (e.g., Allen et al., 2025; Taylor et al., 2025). Mixed-methods designs promise integration but can suffer from superficiality if not executed with care (Johnson et al., 2004). Transparent discussion of these limitations does not weaken a study; rather, it strengthens it by clarifying the scope of inference and signalling epistemic humility. This acknowledgement helps ensure that the methodological positioning contributes to, rather than constrains, the overall contribution by situating findings within a meaningful range of validity.

Finally, methodological justification of the site of inquiry must be connected to the study's anticipated theoretical or practical contribution. Authors should explain how the design supports the development, refinement or testing of concepts; how it might inform practice in similar settings; or how it provides insight into mechanisms that underpin educational processes. The method is not simply a means of collecting data: it is a vehicle for knowledge-building. By making explicit how the methodological choices serve the broader argument, authors demonstrate intentionality, transparency and coherence. These qualities are central to strong scholarship and signal to reviewers that the study is positioned to add value rather than replicate familiar descriptive patterns.

Principle 4. Position Local Contexts within its Complex System

Local institutional cases acquire meaning only when they are situated within the wider systems that shape them. No institution operates as a self-contained environment; each is embedded within interdependent political, economic, cultural and technological structures that exert continuous influence on practice and experience. Treating a university, department or programme as an isolated unit obscures these forces and limits explanatory depth. When authors show how external systems shape local phenomena, the analysis becomes richer, more accurate and more interpretable for readers working in different contexts.

To position a case within its complex system, authors must identify the cross-level dynamics that create the conditions under which local events unfold. Global disruptions like massification, climate crises, digitisation, migration patterns or geopolitical instability frequently shape institutional realities in ways that cannot be understood through internal analysis alone (Brookfield et al., 2023). National policy regimes, funding structures, regulatory environments, demographic pressures and labour-market expectations further constrain what is possible at the institutional level. Technological infrastructures and platform ecologies create additional layers of interdependence. In many cases, these external forces exert more influence on local challenges than any internal organisational factor. Explicitly articulating these relationships helps explain why similar problems arise across diverse institutions, even when local cultures differ.

Situating the institution within its wider system also clarifies the boundary between context-specific and potentially transferable insights. Systems thinking allows authors to identify which findings reflect unique institutional conditions (e.g., such as leadership structures, resource allocation or local culture) and which reflect broader sectoral patterns that others may recognise (Morrison, 2008). This distinction is essential for helping readers assess relevance: when mechanisms are shown to operate across levels, the study becomes a lens on wider and less homogenous challenges rather than an isolated narrative of a single site. Such system-aware positioning increases the interpretive power of the research and strengthens its contribution to understanding sector-wide issues.

Principle 5. Synthesize the Localised Insight to Advance Global Knowledge

Local cases contribute most meaningfully when they move beyond recounting what occurred in a single institution and instead articulate the mechanisms, principles or conceptual insights that have relevance beyond their immediate setting. The value of a case is rarely found in the surface description of a practice or intervention, but in the deeper explanation of *why* it worked, *how* it worked and *under what conditions* it might work elsewhere. This requires authors to interpret their findings in ways that illuminate broader patterns, tensions or theoretical constructs that matter to the field, rather than treating outcomes as self-evident or confined to local particularities.

To achieve this, authors must make explicit what others (i.e., across institutions, sectors or national contexts) can gain from their study. Valuable forms of synthesis include the identification of transferable mechanisms; the refinement or extension of existing theoretical constructs; the articulation of contextual conditions that shape success or failure; and the clarification of methodological approaches that can be replicated, adapted or interrogated elsewhere. Some argue that there are ways to generate forms of analytical generalisability from qualitative research (e.g., Firestone, 1993; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2010; Thomas, 2011). Synthesis does not require universal generalisation, nor does it ignore context; instead, it invites authors to ask which aspects of their findings reflect broader phenomena and which are shaped by their specific institutional setting. This distinction allows readers to understand both the specificity and the portability of the insights.

Finally, synthesis involves returning to the broader problem framing that an author proposed in the introduction and evidencing how the local case expands on those wider questions. This step closes the conceptual arc of the study: authors must demonstrate how their findings refine, challenge or extend what is known about the issue at the system level. Positioned this way, local research becomes part of a collective scholarly project that builds cumulative knowledge. Without this final synthesis, studies risk remaining descriptive accounts of isolated events (e.g., GenAI: Costello et al., 2025; Fitzgerald et al., 2025); with it, they make a substantive contribution to the field by clarifying how local experiences can inform shared debates, theoretical developments and future investigations.

Conclusion

The five principles outlined in this Editorial collectively offer a response to the growing problem of epistemological parochialism in research. They invite authors to recognise that the value of a study depends not only on the quality of its design but also on its orientation toward the wider knowledge landscape. When research begins from the assumption that institutional problems are primarily local, it risks narrowing the intellectual horizon unnecessarily. A more expansive framing, one that understands higher education’s challenges as shaped by global mobility, digital infrastructure, and shared sociocultural experience, positions the local case within the broader epistemic terrain to which it belongs. This shift encourages authors to articulate why an issue began and finished beyond their institution and helps reviewers see the wider significance.

A similar orientation is required when engaging with existing scholarship. Epistemological parochialism often takes the form of insular or underdeveloped literature reviews that treat the institution as the primary context for meaning-making rather than as one point within a larger set of debates. A credible inquiry synthesises how the issue has been conceptualised and examined across contexts and clarifies the study’s relationship to cumulative knowledge. This synthesis provides the foundation for methodological choices that are grounded in theory rather than habit. Methods must be selected for their capacity to illuminate the problem and generate warranted claims, and authors strengthen their contributions when they explain the affordances and limitations of their chosen approach. This extends to the selection of the site of inquiry, and its justification thereof. Equally, recognising that institutional practices emerge within wider political, economic and technological systems clarifies both what is uniquely local in a study and what may apply elsewhere. This systems perspective deepens interpretation and ensures that local cases do not become isolated narratives.

Ultimately, resisting epistemic parochialism requires authors to return to the broader framing at the moment of synthesis. Localised investigations become meaningful scholarly contributions only when they reveal mechanisms, offer conceptual or practical insight or clarify debates in ways that resonate beyond the immediate case. This movement from local description to transferrable understanding is essential for scholarship to travel. The urgency of this work is heightened in the age of artificial intelligence large language models, which increasingly mediate how researchers search, interpret and circulate knowledge. Studies that are narrowly framed or insufficiently situated risk reinforcing the blind spots that these systems already tend to amplify. Research that is globally framed, theoretically anchored, methodologically justified and attentive to system-level conditions enriches both human scholarship and the AI ecosystems that now operationalise it. Addressing epistemic parochialism is therefore a responsibility that extends beyond publication success to the shaping of the epistemic futures of higher education.

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