Chapter 11
Student Mobilities

Elisa Alves and Russell King

Student mobility or student migration? The international (and internal) movement of students displays an equivocal terminology, although the editor of this volume, in presenting us with the title of our chapter, prefers the broader term 'mobilities' in contrast to the titles of the other chapters in this section, which are all forms of 'migration'.

So why is it that, when students move—either internationally, or within their own countries—they are not usually seen as 'migrants', but as something else? This chapter aims to reflect further on the emergence of the twin concepts of migration and mobility as applied to the movement of students—how the concepts have been deployed in various situations and how they have been conditioned (or not) by different theoretical and methodological approaches to the subject of students' spatial moves. Given that migration and mobility both connote geographical movement across space and over a range of periods of time, we 'play' with this notion of movement and propose the alternative term of *student movementation.*

The chapter is structured in three parts. The first develops the definitional, terminological, and conceptual discussion introduced above. In the second section we survey the various directions in past and ongoing research on international student movementation. The conclusion reflects on gaps in our knowledge in this field. Throughout our account we try to give evidence of the empirical richness of research on students' international moves by referring to a wide body of literature.

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P. Scholten (ed.), *Introduction to Migration Studies*, IMISCOE Research Series,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92377-8_11

11.1 Terms, Concepts and Meanings

The movement of students to further their studies abroad is not a new phenomenon. Throughout history, students and scholars have been drawn to important centres of learning and knowledge production (Jöns et al., 2017; Meusberger et al., 2018). What is new, in recent decades, is the scale of the phenomenon of what is now often abbreviated as 'ISM' (which, conveniently, can stand for international student mobility, migration, or movementation). Such student flows are an increasingly significant portion of global migration and of the global knowledge economy (Gürüz, 2008). The most recent data from UNESCO and OECD report a global "stock" of around 5.3 million students studying abroad, compared to 2 million in 2000. ISM increases much faster than aggregate global migration.

If you simply google the expression 'international student mobility', you have around 208 million results; for 'international student migration' the figure is 174 million. These numbers result from many individual and institutions' actions, through blogs, posts, guides, advertisements, news, reports, scientific papers, and books. Such numbers and diverse communication channels are indicative of the importance of ISM as a geographic, social, cultural, economic, and political phenomenon. But what is the difference between ISM *qua* mobility and ISM *qua* migration? Although often used indiscriminately as alternatives, they are not synonyms but, rather, overlapping yet distinctive terms.

Distinctions between student migration or mobility turn around three aspects: the purpose of the move, its duration and the distance covered (King & Findlay, 2012). Regarding purpose, a key distinction is between, on the one hand, what is often called *credit mobility,* which is when a student moves abroad for a semester or an academic year (e.g., in the European context, an Erasmus exchange), and then returns to their 'home' institution and country to complete their qualification; and, on the other hand, studying abroad for *an entire degree,* which could be three or more years. Thus, the purpose of the move intersects with the length of the study abroad. Longer stays abroad often result in 'status switching' when, upon graduation, the student opts, or is encouraged, to stay on to enter the host-country skilled labour market; hence a student visa is swapped for a residence or work permit, and the student becomes akin to a conventional 'immigrant'. Geography plays a role, too, as there is also a partial correlation with distance: mobility is often associated with students moving within Europe, while migration takes students further afield and for longer periods (King et al., 2016).

In addition to the vexed issue of migration vs mobility, and the extent to which this dilemma is resolved by our neologism of movementation, the terms 'international' and 'student' also need to be unpacked. A student abroad may be working for a wage part-time (to support their studies), or be a refugee, activist, or carer; or they could be a full-time worker and part-time student. Indeed, in our contemporary neoliberal world of individual initiative and the gig economy, the mixed figure of the 'student-worker' is increasingly common (Maury, 2019; Wilken & Dahlberg, 2017).

Meantime, an 'international student' may be somewhat distinct from a 'foreign student', dependent partly on the criteria for recording and measurement. A foreign student is recorded on the basis of citizenship; an international student on the basis of country of origin or prior residence. But this is only part of the story. There tends to be reference to international students when talking about students moving in and from the Global North, whereas those from the Global South are seen more as 'foreign' students, defined on the basis of their 'othered' citizenship. Whilst the former are portrayed as cosmopolitans and part of a privileged mobile elite, the latter are seen as an underprivileged and often racialised migrant category—as our research on African students in Portugal has demonstrated (Alves & King, 2021). Above all, it needs to be stressed that international or foreign students are not a homogenous category, far from it; although part of their heterogeneity is based on perceived and socially constructed subcategories (Madge et al., 2015).

11.2 Research Themes Under Discussion

Research on ISM approaches the topic from many different angles. Here we follow the typologies of research themes suggested by Riaño and Piguet (2016), blended with the more conceptual frameworks nominated by King and Findlay (2012). Riaño and Piguet identified six main topics: (i) theories; (ii) directions and patterns; (iii) reasons for moving and experiences abroad; (iv) policies for supranational bodies; national governments and universities; (v) effects and outcomes of ISM; and (vi) future plans for mobility, including experiences after return. For King and Findlay, there are four approaches to theorising and explaining ISM: (i) the globalisation and marketisation of higher education; (ii) students as part of high-skilled migration; (iii) ISM as a mechanism of social-class reproduction and elite formation; and (iv) study abroad as part of youth mobility culture. In what follows, we try to combine these research-topic typologies into a simplified and more generalised set of themes, recognising that the two typological schemas are deeply intertwined.

11.2.1 The Drivers of ISM: Theories, Determinants, and Patterns

Theoretical frames for ISM range from macro-structural forces (e.g. global inequalities in the provision of higher education) to the micro-individualistic motivations of students, with meso-level frameworks, such as the role of universities and social and peer networks, at an intermediate level. Human capital theory spans across these scales, taking on board also the supply and demand sides of ISM (Findlay, 2010). Rooted in neoclassical economic theories of migration, the human capital approach rationalises ISM as an investment in prestigious human and cultural capital whereby

the benefits exceed the costs over the medium to long term. From a supply perspective, knowledge-based societies push students to constantly improve their qualifications and skills, if necessary by 'promising' a professional career with higher rewards in terms of income and life satisfaction (Knight, 2011). Especially from less-developed countries, the lack of higher education infrastructures and opportunities at 'home' pushes ambitious students to move to countries endowed with better and more prestigious university systems (Rosenzweig, 2006). From the demand side, beside formal investments in international education and the expectation of better future rewards, students look for adventure, cultural experiences, and emancipation from their families. This latter set of motivations can apply equally to British students going on a short-term student exchange to nearby Europe (King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003), and to transcontinental Sub-Sahara African students studying for their degrees in Portugal (Alves et al., 2022; António, 2013).

One wide-ranging theoretical typology which encompasses many macro-level factors and is designed to explain broad patterns of student movementation is advanced by Börjesson (2017), who sees the "global space" of ISM structured according to three main principles. The first is geographical proximity. Other things being equal, students will choose destination countries which are close at hand, yet still 'different', in order to minimise travel costs and time, and perhaps also to study in a culture which is not too far removed from their own. Student exchanges and movements within Europe are the best example of this, pioneered by the Erasmus scheme, in operation since the mid-1980s. Second, students move from lesser- to more-developed countries; rarely in the opposite direction. They do so to access higher quality and more prestigious universities. According to the OECD's *Education at a Glance* (2019), in 2018, OECD countries hosted 85% of all foreign students (defined by citizenship), two-thirds of whom were from non-OECD countries, indicating a clear Global South-North (and East-West) patterning. This also reflects the fact that the USA and the UK are the two leading 'importers' of international students, and China and India the main 'exporters'. Third, international students are exemplars of enduring postcolonial relations. Many of them move towards their former colonial metropoles, for cultural and linguistic reasons; whilst on the other side of the coin, the recruitment of these international students is an expression of postcolonial soft power exercised by former imperial centres such as the UK, France, Spain, and Portugal.

In a different context—that of the internationalisation and harmonisation of higher education curricula and academic research networks—ISM can be seen as a form of "knowledge migration" (Raghuram, 2013). Through their movements—outwards, returning, or onwards—students are bearers of this expansion, diffusion, and circulation of knowledge, carried forward in their subsequent lives as highly skilled professionals contributing to the labour markets of wherever they are working. This links directly to issues of class and social reproduction, noted and studied by many authors (King et al., 2011; Leung, 2017; Waters, 2012), who characterise ISM as a way of creating and reinforcing a cosmopolitan and elitist class, the members of which are often highly networked through alumni associations and professional bodies (Bilecen, 2016).

As in all forms of migration and mobility, gender is an important yet understudied dimension in the movement of students abroad and then back to their countries of origin (Geddie, 2013; Sondhi & King, 2017). The gender balance varies according to the country of origin. From the UK, females are the majority going abroad on Erasmus exchanges, largely because of the association of these schemes with language studies, where female students outnumber men (King et al., 2004). From less-developed countries where (for want of a better term) 'traditional' gender divisions and roles are in place, males are the majority in outward movementation. Sondhi and King's (2017) study of Indian student moves to Canada and the UK shows the different gendering of outward and return moves. On the whole, males are more likely to be encouraged by their families to study abroad. Except among highly educated parents, there is a general reluctance amongst Indian families to let their daughters study abroad. But male students are pressurised to return to develop their careers, continue the family lineage, and ultimately be responsible for maintaining their ageing parents; whereas females, who will be 'lost' to another family upon marriage, are less pressured to return. In any case, for Indian female students, study abroad is often an emancipating experience which turns them away from the more conservative aspects of India's patriarchal society. Hence, they are less keen to return.

11.2.2 Policies and Outcomes

Another important line of research has developed into the role of governmental and institutional policies and strategies, usually geared to facilitating, encouraging and managing ISM (Riaño et al., 2018). This covers the actions of national governments and their ministries of (higher) education, regional organisations (at both a sub- and supra-national level), higher education institutions themselves (either individually or in consortia), and a mixture of public and private sector institutional actors, including recruiting agencies for international students and foundations offering scholarships. The increasing marketisation of higher education sees a double competition: on the one hand between countries and between universities for the 'brightest and best' students from around the world—the "global race for talent" (Geddie, 2015); and on the other hand between students for coveted places and scholarships in the 'world-leading' universities according to reputation and global ranking lists (Findlay et al., 2012; Salmi & Saroyan, 2007).

For more specifics on the types and objectives of policies, there are studies on which actors are involved, including their roles and interests, and to what extent they have the capacity to achieve their goals and by what means (see Brooks and Waters (2011) for an overview). Others have investigated postcolonial links in the design and implementation of policies for cooperation (e.g. França et al., 2018); or how to combat the way that ISM can lead to brain drain or brain waste—for instance, policies aiming to improve the rate of return of graduates who have studied abroad (Gëdeshi & King, 2018; Gribble, 2008).

Another strand of literature focuses on the rhetorics and discourses which accompany policies, including persuasive text aimed at prospective international students. King (2003) analysed the discursive frames deployed by the EU and several universities to promote student exchanges and year-abroad mobility in the first phase of the Erasmus programme. He noted two prevalent discourses: an economic one and a cultural one, both pitched at two levels or scales. On the economic front, students were presented with the arguments that studying abroad for part of their degree would improve their chances of landing an interesting and well-paid job, and that employers would value applicants with study-abroad experience, including knowledge of languages and intercultural skills. At a macro-scale, national and European labour markets would likewise be made more competitive, particularly in fields like international business, by having an increased flow of people with linguistic and cultural capital who would readily move abroad and liaise with international clients. Culturally, too, students who had the advantage of a "mobility experience" would be enriched and empowered through their exposure to "another culture". Moreover, for those who moved within Europe subsidised by Erasmus funds, a kind of "European identity" would be acquired, creating thereby a cadre of young graduates who would be loyal to the "European project", and perhaps end up as members of the EU bureaucracy or in the diplomatic service.

Riaño et al. (2018) advance a more sophisticated typology of discourse surrounding ISM, which also incorporates the frames described above. First, international students are seen as channels of knowledge creation and transfer, and eventually of economic growth; part of the "global battle for talent". Second, in another economic discourse, international students are promoted as sources of income for the higher education sector, often because, as in the UK, they are charged higher fees than 'home' students. Third, there is a more negative discourse around international students as "dubious" or "bogus" arrivals whose real aim is not study but entry into a host country's labour market. Typically, they hold a student visa but work in the informal economy. This is the other side of the coin of the second discourse, and mainly regards students originating from high-emigration countries such as China, India, or African countries, who are racialised and somehow seen as less 'desirable' than students from the Global North. Finally, there is a narrative of international students as vehicles of soft power; a means through which a host country can expand its sphere of influence by, firstly, projecting a welcoming discourse towards international students, and second, by implicitly using those students as channels of influence when they return to their countries of origin, sometimes in a postcolonial context (e.g. Angolan, Cape Verdean, and Brazilian students in Portugal (França et al., 2018)), sometimes in a neo-colonial context (e.g. African students in China (Haugen, 2013)).

11.2.3 Experiences Abroad and Plans for the Future

Considering the experiential effects of ISM, some research has questioned whether the study-abroad experience actually does fulfil the students' 'dreams'; or whether it might lead to disappointment, exclusion (because of the language barrier, racism or 'culture shock') and, ultimately, from a human capital perspective, "brain waste" (Gëdeshi & King, 2018; Hawthorne, 2010; Robertson, 2011). Studies have pinpointed the role of initial motivations and expectations at the moment of departure; the first decision-making moment. These expectations can be carefully planned or deliberately open-ended. Students can be ambitious or very cautious; optimistic or pessimistic. Their moves may be pushed or decided upon by their family; or the reverse—study abroad as an 'escape' from the family environment (Alves et al., 2022; Soon, 2012). Moreover, the geopolitical and economic relationship between the student's country of origin and country of destination can also profoundly shape ISM outcomes: whether there is a postcolonial relationship, reinforced by marked contrasts in economic development and higher education standards, or a difference in religion, and ways of behaving in everyday life (see Alves et al., 2022; Kellogg, 2012; Marcu, 2015; Sondhi & King, 2017; Zijlstra, 2015). Other influences on post-study-abroad outcomes are the moral obligation or desire to contribute to the home country's development, and the way students' lives evolve and change during the study abroad, for instance through marriage, having children, or finding a job (Alves et al., 2022; Bijwaard & Wang, 2016; Geddie, 2013; Kim, 2015).

These are the factors that shape the second moment of decision-making—what to do after the completion of the study abroad and the award of a degree or other qualification. Alves (2022) has reviewed these possible outcomes in terms of several geographical and career pathways: stay abroad for further study and/or period of work; move on to another destination country, again either for further study or work; or return home. The return could be immediately upon graduation abroad or following a period of post-study work abroad; and the return could be to immediately enter the home country's skilled labour market, or initially for further study.

11.3 Gaps and Needs: By Way of Conclusion

The study of international student migration/mobility, which we have proposed to be termed *international student movementation*, suffers from some gaps in research, despite the burgeoning literature on ISM in recent years. We start at the beginning, with the very *meaning of the term,* and the way in which alternative framings of this kind of movement vary according to which geo-national vantage point the phenomenon is studied from—developing country, highly developed country, ex-colony, new geopolitical power (e.g. China), European 'core' country, or European 'peripheral' country. Different policy perspectives arise according to these varying global geographical contexts, and also different motivations and drivers on the part of

students. Hence, we call for the development of *comparative research* on ISM experiences, policies and outcomes. A third area of new research, more epistemological, concerns the need to combine disciplinary perspectives in an innovative kind of comparative, cooperative endeavour. ISM cries out for *interdisciplinary research*—from sociologists, especially those specialising in higher education and youth studies, geographers, economists, and others. Fourthly, as with all forms of migration and mobility, there could be much better and *more standardised statistics*. Efforts to harmonise the criteria on which ISM is recorded (citizenship, birthplace, country of habitual or prior residence), and to accommodate the varied temporalities of ISM (short visits, semester, a year, the length of a degree programme, and the transition from 'student' to 'immigrant'), are challenges which are not easily overcome. Next, *gender* needs to be foregrounded more in studies of student movementation. Thus far, very few studies exist which expose an explicit gender dimension, bearing in mind that gender also needs to be intersectionally combined with other key axes of analysis such as class, 'race', and sexuality. Finally, it is worth noting that, behind the academic debate, *research knowledge needs to be fed into policies* which achieve better opportunities and better societies. This is not so simple, as different national contexts are not always aligned, and there is a tendency for ISM to exacerbate inequalities.

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