

## Resilience, moorings, and international student mobilities – Exploring biographical narratives of social science students in the UK

Josef Ploner

### Abstract:

Whilst research into the changing landscape of UK Higher Education (HE) has produced a burgeoning literature on 'internationalisation' and 'transnational student mobility' over the past few years, still fairly little is known about international students' experiences on their way to and through UK higher and further education. Frequently approaching inter- and transnational education as 'neutral' by-products of neoliberal globalisation, elitism and power flows, much HE policy and scholarly debate tends to operate with simplistic classifications of 'international students' and therefore fails to account for the multifaceted nature of students' aspirations, mobilities and life experiences. Drawing on the notion of 'resilience' and insights from the 'new mobilities paradigm', this paper envisages alternative student mobilities which run parallel or counter to the dominant flows of power, financial and human capital commonly associated with an emerging global knowledge economy. Engaging with 'resilient' biographies of social science students studying at three UK HE institutions, the paper challenges narrow student classification regimes and calls for a critical re-evaluation of the relationship between international student mobility and other contemporary forms of migration, displacement and diaspora.

**Keywords:** internationalisation of higher education, transnational student mobilities, moorings, resilience, narrative, biography, UK

### Introduction/context

The UK has become a leading destination for international students over the past two decades, a fact that has been linked to its colonial legacies, the historical profile of its institutions, the possibilities of teaching & learning in a 'global language' as well as strategic planning driven by socio-political calculus (British Council, 2013; Guruz, 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007). Recent figures provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2014) suggest that, in 2012/2013, international students accounted for a total of 425,265 (18.2% of the total UK HE student population). According to these statistical data, most students originated from Asia (8.0%), followed by EU member states (5.4%), Africa (1.5%), North America (1.2%) and the Middle East (1.1%). It is estimated that the total contribution of international students to the UK economy (including further education and private sector colleges) currently ranges between £8-10 billion per year and could reach the £12 billion mark

by 2020 (Sachrajda & Pennington, 2013). The significance of international student mobility to the pursuit of financial revenue by universities, local communities and the state (i.e. student fees, accommodation, etc.) has been extensively discussed as an on-going 'marketization' process, leading to the observation that UK higher education is both a key agent in the neoliberal globalisation of knowledge as well as a 'business' that must respond to the consequences of globalisation (Warwick, 2014). As for the latter, observers criticise contemporary academic and policy debates that tend to present the internationalisation of UK higher education as a 'neutral' or 'normal' experience which simply mirrors the wider hegemonic ordering of global capital and financial exchanges (Findlay, 2010; Perkins & Neumayer, forthcoming). In line with this critique, this paper challenges conventional 'birds-eye' conceptions of internationalisation and transnational student mobility as a 'neutral' by-product of neoliberal globalisation. It does so by engaging with a more 'layered' and 'multi-sited' approach (Madge et al., 2009), which places students' experiences centre stage, thereby envisaging 'alternative' and often nonlinear mobilities that run parallel, or counter to dominant flows of power, capital and knowledge commonly associated with international higher education today (i.e. between the global 'West' and 'emerging' Asian economies). While transnational student mobilities are tightly bound up with uneven (global) power relations and different social and financial affordances, the paper highlights individual performances of 'resilience' which underlie, and indeed, enable such alternative student mobilities. In light of the multifaceted nature of 'international' students' experiences, motivations or choices, conventional student classification regimes employed in UK higher education policy making are challenged, calling for a critical re-evaluation of the relationship between student mobility and other contemporary forms of (voluntary or forced) migration, displacement and Diaspora.

### **Power and international student (im)mobilities**

Whilst the emerging global knowledge economy has clearly generated a wealth of opportunities for transnationally mobile students in terms of cosmopolitan learning experiences, networking, and the proliferation of career trajectories (Bodycott, 2009; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014), it is also characterised by uneven affordances and power relations which marginalise those who are 'immobile' due to social, financial or political reasons. For example,

Findlay et al. (2011) refer to the 'symbolic potency' of Western Higher Education degrees which provide graduates returning to their home countries with major advantages in the labour market compared to locally educated youth. As a consequence, international student mobility plays a significant role in the reproduction of social class by creating an elite of 'overseas educated locals' (Findlay, 2011: 164). As Perkins and Neumayer (2013) argue, such migratory flows are constitutive of an 'internationalising geography of consumption' in which individuals cross borders to take advantage of services and opportunities outside their own state territory. In a similar vein, and building on insights from human geography as well as the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Hannam et al., 2006; Urry, 2007), Brooks and Waters (2013) discuss both the material and symbolic meaning of international student mobility and convincingly argue that international student mobility is never a 'neutral act' but generates uneven power relations at different scales, reaching

*"...from the differential power of nation states to control and direct internationalisation and international student flows, to the power of individual educational institutions to attract and retain large numbers of international students, to the power of individual families to draw upon the sometimes vast resources necessary to make educational mobility happen."* (Brooks and Waters, 2013:130).

As for the power and resources of individual families, most research assumes that international students originate from relatively wealthy and privileged economic and social backgrounds (Findlay et al., 2006; Epstein et al., 2007; Brooks & Waters, 2010). This is a fair judgement in view of an increasing number of international students at fee-charging 'Western' higher education institutions who emanate from 'emerging' or 'newly industrialising economies' (NIEs) such as Brazil, China, India, Malaysia, Mexico or Philippines (HESA, 2014, Perkins & Neumayer, 2013). Indeed, scholars have referred to the rise of an educational 'multi-passport elite' (Beverstock, 2002) or an international 'education jet-set' (Baty, 2012) who can afford, and skilfully capitalise on international higher education credentials, especially from universities ranking high in international league tables (Deem et al., 2008; Findlay et al., 2011). Although the observation of an emerging internationally mobile elite is credible, it largely fails to account for students who derive from less privileged or otherwise 'disadvantaged' social environments, for whom access to 'Western' higher education is a valuable pathway towards life-changing opportunities, empowerment, political freedom or economic security (Stevenson

& Willot, 2007; Sellar & Gale, 2011;). One reason why a more nuanced analysis is not available is that, firstly, relatively little is known about the actual socio-economic status of international students as this is not (and cannot be) fully assessed in standardised HE student evaluations. A second reason is that the voices of international students continue to be silenced in current debates on international student mobility, not least due to the tendency to perceive them as 'cash cows' whose social and pedagogical experience comes only second to the need to attract them (Brooks and Waters, 2013, p. 131). Moreover, and considering transnational mobilities as a complex amalgamation of interlocking systems, converging flows and orderings (Hannam et al., 2006; Urry, 2007), very few authors have critically addressed the manifold ways in which international higher education ties in with concurrent mobilities linked to, or triggered by, economic deprivation, discrimination, persecution, labour migration, refugee- and asylum seeking, etc. (Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Tannock, 2013). In view of prevailing media discourses in the UK and elsewhere, such connections are often reduced to a language of 'abuse' or 'bogus' which argues that increasing numbers of illegal immigrants are seeking acceptance to degree courses and student visa only to establish access to the UK labour market (Tannock, 2013; Grove, 2012; The Guardian, 2012). Although data is limited, evidence suggests that a vast majority of students coming from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) stay in the UK only temporarily, with some 20% staying up to five years and only 10% settling in the UK permanently (Sachrajda & Pennington, 2013). While still being under-researched in the UK, scholars in other major student-receiving countries have explored the complex nexus between international education and other forms of migration. For example, in Australia, Robertson and Runganaikaloo (2013) analysed the ways in which international students, attempting to settle in the country as 'skilled migrants' after graduation, experience long waiting phases characterised by anxiety, stress and praxes of 'flexible citizenship' in view of rigid Australian immigration regimes. However, while being forced into underpaid temporary jobs and a precarious state of 'limbo', these student-migrants also exercise resilience and agency via a multitude of coping strategies which successfully synchronise their own desires for career mobility, flexibility and financial capital with the shifting economic or educational interests of the state.

Clearly, stereotyping international students either as 'affluent cash cows' or 'illegal immigrants in disguise' is extremely limiting and fails to account for diversity and a myriad of aspirations

and experiences of students on their way to and through 'Western' higher education. However these educational mobilities may be shaped, there is strong evidence to suggest that a large number of students have to cope with major tribulations, emotional stress and personal hardship, not least due to experiences of displacement and uprooting they face moving in unfamiliar cultural, social and educational environments (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Sherry et al., 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Drawing on such experiences, this paper addresses individual strategies of coping with such experiences via the notion of 'resilience' - commonly associated with the mastery of adversities by individuals and groups - which shall be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

### **Resilience and moorings in international higher education**

'Resilience' refers to a widely studied yet frequently contradictory set of concepts used across a variety of disciplines, including engineering and transport studies, ecology (Folke, 2006), human and cultural geography (Adger, 2000), sport studies, health and risk factor analysis (Reich et al., 2010) as well as childhood and developmental psychology (Luthar, 2003). As for education studies, Almedom et al. (2009) state that the bulk of literature on 'resilience' and related constructs of 'mastery' or 'thriving' in the face of adversity is historically located in social and developmental psychology, mainly focussing on strategies of mental and social defiance among children and young adults living in 'sub-optimal' homes and social environments. In a critical appraisal of various approaches to 'resilience' in the context of education, Walker et al. (2006) define it as the "...ability to recover rapidly from difficult situations" and "[the] capacity to endure ongoing hardship in every conceivable way." (p. 251) In a similar, albeit more deterministic vein, Reivich and Shatte (2002: 59) define resilience as "...a basic strength underpinning positive characteristics within a person's emotional and psychological make-up."

Although there is a wealth of research into resilience in adolescence studies, primary and secondary education (Bryan, 2005), the concept has only recently emerged in studies on students' learning contexts and 'experiences' in further and higher education (Walker et al., 2006). This new interest certainly corresponds with the growing recognition of the economic and emotional challenges students face in present-day competitive, globalised and

increasingly neo-liberal higher education settings. Considering the recurrent political rhetoric of 'austerity' and 'uncertainty' in the aftermath of the recent global financial crisis, it has to be noted that 'resilience' has emerged as a popular, if not overused, watchword to describe perseverance, creativity, sustainability and coping strategies across various social and organisational systems, including education (Krasny et al., 2011; Masten, 2012). Despite the increase of international student mobility, however, to date most research addresses resilience in the context of 'social mobility' and inclusion of 'minority' or so-called 'non-traditional' domestic student groups, resulting in a series of studies concerned with resilience in relation to race (Edwards, 2009; Shield, 2004), gender (Morales, 2008), social class (Bryom & Lightfoot, 2013), sexual orientation, mental health, disability or dyslexia (Anderson & Burgess, 2011). If addressed at all, 'resilience' among students defined as 'international' is mainly linked to more or less quantifiable elements such as 'academic adjustment', 'achievement' and 'retention', or else, with the ways in which they are able to cope with 'culture shock' and manage to 'adapt' to unfamiliar educational and/or cultural environments (Gunnestad, 2006; Zhou et al., 2008; Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Cheung and Yue, 2012). In this context, the notions of 'acculturation' or 'adaptation' are problematic since they tend to assume an overtly simplistic notion of 'culture' as something clearly definable in terms of nationality (i.e. 'British culture', 'Chinese Culture', etc.), which also reinforces notions of a hegemonic 'culture' (i.e. white, Anglophone, middle-class) dominant in higher education institutions. In line with this critique, existing research into resilience has also largely failed to account for the complex mobilities and transnational connections of 'domestic' (i.e. UK passport-holding) students, many of whom have experienced migration and displacement themselves or are members of communities with recent or long-standing histories of diaspora (for example Afro-Caribbean, Pakistani, Eastern European minority communities in the UK). Once again, this lack of research calls for a closer examination of interlinks between international student mobility and other (voluntary or involuntary) forms of migration caused by economic precariousness, conflict or political persecution.

Tackling these shortcomings and drawing on the insights of the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Hannam et al., 2006; Urry, 2007), this study follows a more nuanced approach to the ways in which resilience is performed by students in increasingly heterogeneous and competitive international higher education settings. In mobilities studies, 'resilience' has been associated

with the functioning and management of moorings, nodal points, or relays which maintain the interconnectedness of systems and allow for the smooth flow of people, objects and information within and across these systems in times of emergency or crisis. Hannam et al. (2006) exemplify the significance of moorings in the context of natural disasters such as the hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the USA in 2005, which drastically revealed the vulnerability of interlocked systems such as local, municipal and state governance, commerce, communication, transport or tourism. Hence, the authors call for a coherent programme within the social sciences to assess the complexity of mobilities and moorings and to help build 'resilience' across interconnected systems. In view of such readings of resilience as the organisation of nodal points between, and flows across connected systems, it is interesting to note that literature on international student mobility has frequently employed metaphors of transit and connectedness such as 'bridges', 'routes', 'pathways', 'trajectories' or 'navigations' (Collins, 2008; Holdsworth, 2009). However, rather than reiterating these metaphors denoting (mostly one-way) transit and direction, this paper considers resilience as an intrinsic element of mobility and a key component in the dialectical processes of de-territorialisation and reterritorialisation occurring in international higher education today. Drawing on Hannam's et al. (2006) dialectic of 'mobilities and moorings' – the logic that forms of detachment and uprooting are always accompanied by attachments and rootings of some kind – resilience does not so much relate to linear forms of 'adjustment' or the mastery of 'culture shock', but describes the ways in which both movement and sense of place are constantly negotiated by students moving in and across international HE settings.

The notion of 'mooring' is weakly defined by Urry (2007) who refers to it as spatial, infrastructural and institutional fixity or nodal point which is mobile 'within' while enabling other things to stay in flux. Given the influence of the German sociologist Georg Simmel on mapping out a 'new mobilities paradigm' (Urry, 2007, pp. 20-26), it is worthwhile stressing that the notion of 'mooring' bears great resemblance to Simmel's idea of 'pivot point' (*Drehpunkt*). Simmel (1997) introduced this concept to refer to particular places which, through their fixation in space allow for flow and a multiplicity of relational forms (*Beziehungsformen*) that are continually rearranged through it. According to Simmel, every unmovable object around which social interactions, economic transactions or other flows occur, can be a potential 'pivot point', representing a stable and ensuring centre amidst otherwise labile, mobile and incoherent

social and cultural conditions (Simmel, 1997, p. 146). He states that the significance of such pivot points lies in their power to conjoin and synchronise otherwise independent and incoherent elements that, at least temporally, assemble and become manifest in a particular place. Simmel refers to the resonating power of such centres which require the presence of individuals and may nurture both individual and collective feelings of attachment and participation.

As with other contemporary 'moorings' such as airports, stations, factories, technological infrastructures and, indeed, universities which facilitate mobilities through performances of (re)ordering, problem-solving, gathering, sorting, (re)assembling, refuelling or timing, it is argued here that resilience can be characterised by similar processes taking place in and across moorings (Vannini et al., 2011). The notion of performance is crucial here, precisely because resilience can also be described as the ability to 'move on' despite the absence of seemingly stable (and mostly spatially defined) moorings (i.e. institutional support systems, family networks, 'home' environments, educational and social 'comfort zones', etc.). In this context, performing resilience underscores the significance of agency by individuals and groups in coping with life challenges. To understand resilience and mooring as a complex set of dialectic performances runs counter to a particular language used in much HE policy research which tends to spatially fix 'student experience' solely to the locality and residence of study (university). Likewise, it challenges conventional readings of experience and resilience as being temporally confined to the (international) 'student life cycle' (time between registration and graduation), thereby ignoring how biographies, social relations as well as past or simultaneous mobilities inform the ways students cope with situations perceived as challenging or adverse.

### **Methodology:**

This paper draws on findings from a research project funded by the (former) *Higher Education Academy's Subject Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics* (C-SAP) entitled "Promoting students' resilient thinking in diverse higher education learning environments." (Caruana et al., 2011). It involved one Further and two Higher Education institutions in the north of England, each of which represented a different type of tertiary institution according to



current UK classification regimes, i.e. one research-intensive 'Russell Group' university, one 'new' or 'post-92' university and one further education college. This mode of selection sought to capture the breadth of students' resilience experiences across different institutional formats while maintaining comparable parameters in relation to student numbers at the institutions and study locations – three northern English cities similar in size, post-industrial history and socio-economic and demographic characteristics (i.e. immigration patterns, 'minority' communities, etc.). Irrespective of their status as 'domestic' or 'international', students were invited via an open call which featured key information about the project and which was disseminated via course and module leaders, student unions, relevant social networking sites as well as general student access points across the participating institutions. Contact persons of trust such as module and personal tutors were also approached to 'recruit' students for the project. Twenty-one students followed the invitation with an almost equal share of five to eight students coming from each of the three participating institutions.

In order to counterbalance conventional methods designed to quantify resilience via grades of 'adjustment' or 'retention' within the student life cycle, this study applied biographical interviewing as a means to capture students' experiences both during and prior to their time in Higher and Further education. Such an approach accounts for a more qualitative view on students' individual 'life journeys' and formative experiences, as well as identifying the significance of permanent or temporary 'moorings' such as family, social networks and community relations, university or work places, etc. Biographical interviewing also provides sensitive and iterative pathways between researcher and participant by sharing intimate life reflections in the process of two-way and loosely structured conversations. The use of biographical interviewing aligns with Büscher's and Urry's (2009) proposal for a more rigorous 'mobile methods' agenda which ought to overcome conventional methodological stasis by 'moving with' people, places, information and objects. Not least, this is because biographical interviewing provides space for articulations of 'haunting' memories which generate narrative orderings of past events and experiences that are co-produced by the research participant and researcher in the interview process. Biographical interviewing reiterates geographies, temporalities, relationships and transfer points which are of key significance for the interviewee, and hence allows the researcher to move with, and be moved by the subject's narrative, thereby 'tuning into' the organisation of his/her movement (Büscher & Urry, 2009:

103). Despite the loose and dialogical nature of the interview process, researchers adhered to a formulated set of questions which were piloted and reviewed by a group of students prior to field work, and which moved from more general questions ('Tell me about yourself?', 'Where is home?', 'What did you do before you came to university?', etc.), to more specific questions addressing students' individual interpretations and lived experiences of 'resilience', their initial motivations to study at university/FE college, or their future career aspirations. The aim of piloting the interview questions on a group of student volunteers was not to scope potential 'themes' or utterances emerging from stories about lived resilience, but to guarantee that questions are formulated and sequenced in a sensitive and non-invasive manner which would help to build trust and encourage students to talk openly.

Retrospectively, the open and sensitive character of the questions helped to build a certain level of trust relevant for the conversations as they unfolded. Indeed, many of the students voluntarily fed back to the interviewer on their interview experience via personal emails, expressing the positive and at times 'therapeutic' effect it had on them and stating that it was a rare, if not the first opportunity to speak openly about their experience. In order to preserve anonymity of the research participants, their names have been changed in this paper. Equally, the names of the participating universities are not mentioned, but will be indicated by capital letters: A (research-intense 'Russell Group' university), B ('post-92' modern university) and C (Further Education College). The 21 students who agreed to be interviewed represent both undergraduate and postgraduate study levels. Out of the 21 participants, eight students held British citizenship while the remaining 13 students represent different nationalities from Africa, Europe, the Middle East, East and South East Asia as well as the USA.

Due to the self-selection process of research participants and the focus on three northern English HE institutions, this study does not, and cannot claim to be representative for a wider or total international student population in the UK. Another limitation linked to the representativeness and generalisability of findings is that they emerge from narrative interviews with students who can be defined in common educational terminology as 'non-mainstream', 'non-traditional' or even 'hard to reach', whose overall numbers are not reflected in standard statistical accounts on international student mobility, i.e. as provided by the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA). The participation of students from less prominent student-emitting countries (including Guinea, Latvia, Iran or Syria), those who only recently

acquired British citizenship, or individuals with other immigration backgrounds (e.g. asylum, or 'Discretionary Leave to Remain in the UK' status), means to engage with a hidden population whose voice, experience and profile is rarely assessed in existing research (c.f. Perkins & Neumayer, 2013). Addressing individual life histories and performances of resilience, however, this study provides valuable insights into the diversity of experiences which become meaningful to students and hence influence, if not determine, their attitudes, aspirations and values towards 'international' higher and further education. It does so by moving away from deterministic psychological approaches to resilience as in-built human trait or immovable capital, but instead seeks to interpret the ways in which it surfaces and is performed in particular life contexts and trajectories. As such, the paper aims at sketching a picture of such a hidden student population within contemporary UK higher and further education which may prompt further research in this area.

Since this study was commissioned by the (former) Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics (C-SAP), one limitation may be that it only covers a particular set of disciplines, that is social science programmes in social anthropology, sociology, politics and related subject areas (e.g. criminology; global development studies, etc.). However, given the broader relevance and currency of 'resilience' within these subject fields (i.e. in relation to discourses on globalisation, migration, mobility, citizenship, social change, etc.), this study generates valuable insights into how students' individual life stories correspond with overarching social science subject matters, curricula or research agendas.

Having discussed the methodological and ethical aspects of this project, the following section recounts three biographical stories which reveal how students manage to cope with, and negotiate adverse life situations, both in their pasts as well as in their present as HE/FE students. These stories were selected in such way to assure that students from all three participating institutions are represented. Although the presented biographical accounts differ in terms of lived experiences and individual performances of resilience, emphasis was placed on selecting students whose educational career had been previously disrupted due to various reasons (i.e. private/family circumstances, political conflict, migration, etc.) and who entered or re-entered higher education at a later stage in their lives. This is because a significant proportion of the overall interview sample (12 students) shared similar 'non-mainstream' experiences and can be regarded as 'mature students' in line with UK student classification

standards (i.e. as defined by the Higher Education Statistical Agency). Besides aiming to reflect the voices of students from different (and often under-represented) nationalities, the selection of narratives in this paper also acknowledges different study levels and stages (i.e. first year and close to completion) since this may affect the ways in which students reflect on individual performances of resilience and express a sense of belonging and accomplishment within their higher and further education careers. Due to the individual and intimate nature of these stories which allowed students to 'speak for themselves', an in-depth narrative analysis was largely omitted. However, a final analytical discussion section will map out some themes emerging from these case studies and critically reflect on the ways in which they correspond with prevailing discourses on 'resilience' and (international) 'student experience' in UK higher education today. As such, the findings emerging from the individual case studies aim at generalising towards theory rather than towards populations (Bryman, 2008) whilst challenging existing generalisations about international student experience in present-day UK higher education.

***"I spent half of my life or more travelling...." Adnan (Syria/UK)***

Adnan is a mature student from Syria in his final year in Politics at University B. Now in his mid-40s, Adnan has moved to the UK in 2002 and has since managed to build up a small 'take-away' restaurant in a northern English town, not far from his university city. He is married to a Syrian wife and together they have three children aged between one and ten. Having had to interrupt his education in Syria at the age of 18 due to his recruitment to the Syrian armed forces in the Lebanon in the early 1990s, Adnan feels a deep gratitude towards the UK for the opportunity of returning to university, given that for an extended period in his adult life "....everything around me was against my will to continue studying." This period began with his recruitment to a special unit in the Syrian army at the age of 19. Adnan remembers the extremely hard drill and 'training' he received and his strategy to "...throw away my feelings" in order to be "able to continue". He recounts:

*"Many people died during the training because it's not training at all and they would not believe anybody if he said 'I'm ill' or 'I can't do something' (...) Once, we got punished in thorns, they left us without clothes, just shorts...and most of [my] body was, like, I get infections where*

*there are hundreds of thorns... I dug [them] out of my body, my skin, but what was left inside got infected."*

A devout Muslim, Adnan was also restricted in practicing his daily prayers during his time in the army. After his release, he spent another five years in Lebanon for work, during which time he tried to resume his university studies in Beirut, albeit with little success. In 1997, he took up a job as sales manager in West Africa working for an international car trading company. Having survived two malaria infections during this period, Adnan got married to a teacher in 2000 and, together with his wife, resettled in Dubai where he set up business selling second-hand jewellery and watches – a trade he had 'grown up with' at his father's shop in Syria. Despite his experience, Adnan had only minor success in Dubai and, together with his wife, decided to move to the UK in 2002. During the interview, Adnan does not specify the reasons for emigrating to the UK but emphasises his persistent desire to continue studying for a university degree there, first embarking on a two-year English language and IT training programme at a further education college, and later enrolling for a BA politics course at university B. Adnan describes his motivation to study politics as a pure thirst for knowledge combined with a deep aspiration to overcome the ideological indoctrinations (he uses the term "background ideology") with which he grew up in Syria: *"...using Israel and our occupied land as a reason to just shut the mouths in Syria, not to let people talk about or to, er, say any comments about the bad behaviour of the regime."* Given the timing of the interview, which coincided with the wake of the 'Syrian uprising' in 2011, Adnan expresses his pride to be Syrian and his avid use of the Internet and social media to access uncensored information about the latest developments in the civil war-stricken country and to stay in touch with family and friends. In addition to that, he regularly meets fellow Syrian expatriates to discuss the latest developments and he articulates his wish to contribute to political and social change in what he still considers to be his home country:

*"I have to do something for Syria, to give advice, to help develop political life (...) How, I don't know now, but, I think, in my pocket there are a lot of things I can take with me to Syria. Er, my brain, let me say [laughs] (...) My daughters [were] born here, grew up here and they are British and they are Syrian and I think they could help me to do something for what England did for us as a family actually"*

Balancing his take-away business, family life, his studies as well as experiencing language problems and detachment from his younger (and mostly British) fellow students, Adnan struggled to succeed at the beginning of his course, but feels that he has developed confidence, success and a good relationship with his colleagues since then: “[The] *first year was too difficult because I found myself in a new world. Second year my wife became pregnant. Third year, now, I think is the best year.*”

***“I’m pretty much a fish outside the water” – Tina (Philippines/UK)***

“I’m from the Philippines, I’m a Christian, I’m a wife and a mum and a Masters student”. This is how Tina, who studies in her first year in Global Social Policies at University A, describes herself with a few, succinct words. The reason she came to study in the UK in her mid-twenties was that she followed her husband who had been offered a PhD scholarship at university A, sponsored by the Filipino government. Tina describes her own childhood and upbringing as ‘privileged’ and ‘academic’, but also as ‘isolated’. Born into a family of academics, she spent most of her life within the confines of a metropolitan, Catholic university campus in the Philippines and explains: “my parents both worked for the university and my siblings and I all studied in the university from kindergarten to college.” Having suffered from “emotional abuse” and “isolation” from her parents throughout her childhood and youth, Tina’s life became more settled after marrying and moving together with her partner. At that time, both had embarked on a successful academic career and secured permanent positions at their university in the Philippines. It was not until long, however, that this stable and “good life” was struck by disaster as the young couple’s house was destroyed by a fire which left Tina suffering from pneumonia and forced her to retire from her job and abandon social science masters programme she had started previously. The difficulties continued after Tina’s recovery when “...*my husband and I decided to have a child. And then, I was..., I had a troubled pregnancy. So I couldn’t go back to study. So I just took a backseat for a while.*” It wasn’t long after the birth of her daughter that Tina’s husband received his scholarship to study in the UK. Tina describes her subsequent move to the UK as follows:

*"It was just very scary for me, ...but it would have been wrong not to go, not to allow him, because he didn't want to go without me, ..., we both know that a lot of families are breaking up when one spouse has to go away for a long time, especially since we had a daughter."*

An additional difficulty was that Tina felt "a lot of inhibitions" which she thinks originate from her troubled childhood: "I've always been afraid of the world. That's why it was so hard for me to make a decision to come here, but I'm starting to open up slowly [laughs]."

Besides finding strength in her husband and daughter, Tina refers to the "tremendous support" she has received from her fellow students, university mentors and support staff as well as a local church community she and her husband joined shortly after her arrival to the UK "...where we, sort of, found a home."

Although Tina progressed well in her UK course, an unexpected incident triggered haunting memories of her childhood and the troublesome relationship with her parents. In an email she sent to the author shortly after the interview had been conducted, she wrote:

*"I interviewed someone for my research portfolio who turned out to be neglected and abandoned in childhood. This resurfaced a lot of painful memories from my own childhood. Since my family was celebrating our first white Christmas, I forced myself to be 'ok'. I eventually reached my breaking point. I was completely overwhelmed by the pressure to be 'ok'; homesickness; expectations regarding care work and housework from my family who constantly needed my attention; and pressure from myself as module assessment deadlines neared. I began to second guess myself and engage in constant negative internal dialogue. At the advice of a classmate, I started having regular sessions at the university counselling service. It has helped me a great deal. Equally important is the huge support I receive from my husband and Christian friends."*

Tina also states that her stay in the UK has changed her in a positive way:

*"...in terms of being more accepting, ..., appreciating who I am, and being less afraid than before. That's a big change. Just having horizons opening up. I have this feeling right now that my eyes are opening up. The world is such a big place. I used to live in this really small corner, and I kept myself in there..."*

Although Tina is enjoying the positive 'eye-opening' transformation she experiences while studying in the UK, she has a strong desire to return to the Philippines after graduation, not least because she feels to have to "give something back" to her home university and the "Filipino tax payers who paid for our education." Yet, her future aspirations are to work and travel the world for a globally-operating NGO specialising in the promotion of children's rights.

***"You want peace and you are ready to go wherever there is peace..."*** Joanna (Republic of Congo/UK)

Joanna is a 38 year-old Congolese woman who studies criminology in her final year at institution C - a further education college in a northern English city. She arrived in the UK in 2007 as asylum seeker from a refugee camp in Zambia - where she had escaped from her war-stricken home country seven years earlier. Joanna describes her upbringing and education in the Congo as rather privileged as she was given the opportunity to attend a good boarding school and to continue training as a school teacher - a profession she would take up soon after successfully completing her training. Disillusioned with not being paid for her teaching job (*"...the government don't really pay their employees, you know"*), she embarked on another training course in development studies in order to *"...look for a job where I could be more independent."* At that time Joanna completed this training course, she was already married, had two children and even managed to secure a job in another Congolese city. It was during that period that war broke out and Joanna, then expecting her third child, was forced to flee the country together with her family. The escape to Zambia marks a traumatic and decisive moment for Joanna and her family. She recalls:

*"(...) the area where we like spending a night there were, like, bombs (...). Some people died and when they start bombing you just wake up and start running. That's how I lost my parents. They did not die, I just lost them and for a year I did not know if they were alive or not. Fortunately after one year they opened another camp in the same country. That's when I knew that my parents came back. We were there with my sister and I was happy."*



Joanna had given birth to her last child two days before crossing the border to Zambia where she found herself and her three children in a refugee camp. Shortly after she reached the camp, she came to realise that her husband had left her for another woman:

*“He just disappeared immediately. And imagine that my first daughter was five, the second one was three and the other baby now. Gone. And immediately my daughter, the second daughter, became like mad, serious madness.”*

It is difficult to provide a full account of Joanna’s life in the refugee camp. Nevertheless, she describes how she experienced the development of the camp from ‘nothing’ into a functioning village:

*“...in the beginning the camp itself was, like, open bush (...) They just gave, like, each family, 20 metre by 30 metre. They are not giving anything to start with. So you are there, you don’t know what to eat, you don’t know where to go, even for simple things like toilet. Nothing in place at the time. (...) Just in, like, three weeks, it started giving a kind of small village and as the time was flowing in seven years, honestly, we have already five primary schools, two secondary schools and adult education centres like that. Life started becoming a bit easier.”*

Joanna also states that life in the camp was “a bit easier” for her thanks to her education and skills:

*“At the time there were some NGOs that came for picking some jobs and because I was already educated, especially in, like, the development, I started managing projects in the camp (...) And for me, because I was working and it was a big job, it was a bit easier. [Interviewer: “So you could teach there?”] Yeah, and I was most focused on agriculture, because we had to teach people how to do farming.”*

After seven years, when her application for ‘resettlement’ was accepted, Joanna was transferred to the northern English city where she still lives. She and her children were allocated a small house by the city council, but life in their neighbourhood turned out to be difficult:

*“Honestly,... I started thinking that life in the camp was easier (...) Honestly, it was not good for us. There was too much anti-social behaviour, racism, all sorts of, disorder...I was not happy.”*

Spending her first year in the UK “doing nothing” except learning English and successfully arranging to move into a new flat and neighbourhood, Joanna contemplated the thought of enrolling for a criminology course at institution C. Her decision to eventually choose this subject was deeply motivated by her experience of displacement, resettlement and racism:

*“I started thinking about (Name of UK City) because I was living there in the house you see. I started thinking about ‘what did I do to myself? ...Because I was confused... because whenever you go out they throw eggs, tell us to go back, you know, those kind of things. They are throwing wood all against your house. I was just thinking ‘what should I do?’ Then I just thought ‘o.k.’ ...when I came to college I started reading what they have and I said, ah, through criminology at least I’d be able to know how people function, how this society functions and maybe also work with the police or whoever to try and...maybe.”*

Due to the age difference to her fellow students and insecurities in her use of English, as well as managing her studies with family responsibilities as part-time student, Joanna felt deeply “isolated” in the first year of her course. This situation changed after she consulted one of her tutors who arranged for her to meet and converse with other students as part of an institution-run ‘buddy’ scheme. In addition to that, Joanna gained confidence and English skills by working as a part-time translator and by actively engaging in charity and community work. The latter, she hopes, will also help her to “integrate into society”.

## **Discussion**

Although the three stories do not claim to be representative in relation to the diverse (and often hidden) spectrum of inter- and transnational student mobilities to the UK, they certainly reveal the complex and multifaceted nature of students’ motivations, aspirations and experiences on their way to and through UK higher Education. As such, the presented biographies call for a critical reassessment of prevailing assumptions about global ‘degree mobility’ which tend to reduce international students to an elitist caste of young adults, who are in the position to choose and pursue Higher and Further education anywhere in the wider context of an increasingly neoliberal knowledge market place. Indeed, the narratives contest currently

dominant student classification regimes (i.e. 'UK', 'Non UK', 'domestic', 'overseas', 'traditional', 'non-traditional', etc.) as boundaries between genres, places and identities become blurred and are constantly negotiated by individuals as students, migrants, refugees, citizens, sojourners, travellers, mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, colleagues, etc. At the same time, the examples also urge to challenge emerging populist stigmatisations of international students as 'bogus students' or 'illegal immigrants' who to capitalise on Western welfare systems through education pathways.

Going beyond conventional analyses of 'resilience' in HE research as the mastery of adverse situations performed only within a narrowly defined 'student life cycle', the biographies presented in this paper shed light on the complexity of students' life histories, motivations and experiences leading up to the decision to pursue, and succeed in Higher and Further education. In this context, the concept of 'resilience' as a set of performances of coping with challenging circumstances has proven to be useful since it places diversity and individual agency centre stage rather than rehearsing universalist assumptions of 'adaptation', 'acculturation' or 'adjustment' – terms, frequently used in higher education policy and research discourses. The presented narratives suggest that in the face of adversity and dissonance, diverse students perform resilience in a variety of ways that enable change, personal development and domains of stability.

Students' narratives also reveal the ways in which performances of resilience relate to the dialectical interplay between mobilities and moorings within individual biographies. Adnan's, Tina's and Joanna's stories identify significant moorings such as family, friendships, community and collegiate relations, accommodations and dwellings, places of education, jobs, virtual or real communication networks, sites of faith and worship, institutional staff and support systems, etc. It is important to note that, although suggesting fixity and stability, apparent moorings can also become places which demand extraordinary performances of resilience as reflected in Joanna's narrative about her work as a teacher in the refugee camp or Tina's troubled relationship with her family home, etc. Moreover, the stories indicate that resilience can be described as the everyday negotiation of concurrent and often conflicting spatio-temporal mobilities and flows such as semester timetables, assignments and course work deadlines, childcare and family rhythms, 'school runs' and commuting, part-time jobs, financial transactions, institutional bureaucracies, immigration procedures, etc.

What clearly emerges from students' narratives is the significance of universities, and perhaps more importantly, particular disciplines as moorings which enable students to successfully negotiate, re-organise and make sense of' their troublesome biographies and life challenges. This is expressed, for example, in Adnan's desire to assess, without preconceptions, conflict and political instability in his native Syria; Joanna's wish to 'understand', through criminology, the causes and nature of war, conflict or the 'anti-social behaviour' she experienced both in the Congo and in the UK; or Tina's aspiration to use her education to work for a NGO promoting children's rights worldwide. These meaningful engagements with one's own biography, which entail making sense of past traumatic events while forging future aspirations and life projects, add additional layers to existing views emphasising the liminal character of being a student as a state in which individuals experiment with provisional and temporary identities (Field, 2012). While being a student represents *de facto* a transient experience and universities can be described as temporary moorings, the interviewed students convey clear and confident ideas about selfhood, independence and personal aspirations which appear to leave little room for major identity experiments of some sort. Perfectly capable of articulating, planning and pursuing their personal projects, these students rather develop what Clegg (2011) calls 'possible selves' – a sense of identity that functions as “an essential link between self-concept and motivation, playing both a cognitive and affective role in motivation and success.” (Clegg, 2011, p.96).

In line with these analytical reflections on the liminal nature of students' experiences, the dialectical interplay between mobilities and moorings, becomes tangible in some of the ways in which students express how they negotiate and navigate in, and between, different life worlds. Approaching resilience as successful negotiation between mobilities and moorings goes far beyond prevailing one-way discourses of 'acculturation' and 'adjustment' frequently used in policy assessments of international student mobility in the UK. As the case studies reveal, this often relates to existing and, at times, complex social entanglements between 'home' and 'abroad', reflected in the avid use of mobile technologies and/or new media to 'stay in touch' with friends, relatives, social, religious and political networks; or repeated articulations of using education as a means to 'give something back' to one's 'home country' while practicing active citizenship in one's 'host' country. Despite the previously voiced critique of 'methodological nationalism' as *de-facto* reference for classifying students (Tannock, 2013;

Brooks & Waters, 2013), the examples presented highlight the significance of nationality as a key identity marker for the interviewed individuals. Such ongoing negotiations between 'home' and 'host' country qualify themselves as powerful expressions of lived resilience. They equally allude to individual performances of 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) and become an integral part of a social poetics of belonging which asks how people define binary oppositions and how resilience is enacted within ongoing negotiations of place and power (Hedetoff & Hjort, 2002; Herzfeld, 2005).

Similarly, the presented case studies, and by extension, the larger interview sample, also seem to confirm findings of a recent study by Perkins and Neumayer (2013) which indicate that relations to pre-existing immigrant and family networks in host countries exert a substantively large impact on spatial patterns of international student mobilities and may be even more influential than university reputation and 'competitiveness' factors. This, in turn, suggests that international student mobilities appear to be enabled and constrained by many of the same factors as other forms of migration and share similar mooring strategies.

Perhaps most importantly, the three stories denote higher and further education institutions as meaningful 'moorings' which go beyond being mere entry, transit, and exit points and provide instead ample space for individuals to (re)order, negotiate and make sense of haunting life experiences as well as to envisage possible futures. Such orderings and acts of sense-making, however, do not necessarily support definitions of resilience as an inbuilt individual act of will and perseverance since all students highlight the support of social and professional networks (lecturers, tutors, counsellors, fellow students, etc.) which enabled them to cope with challenging life experiences and manage concurrent and often dissonant mobilities (i.e. migration/resettlement, learning/family life, career pathways, etc.). Students' narratives suggest that these support networks do particularly matter during the transition phase into Higher and Further education as expressions of temporary 'confusion', 'not belonging' or 'isolation' during this period feature strongly in the presented case studies. However, rather than dwelling on well-established advocacies of student support or emerging neo-liberal ideas of student 'service', the three stories also reveal that HE/FE institutions can learn a great deal about their students and the ways in which they master and organise their personal pasts, presents and futures. Such an awareness of student life (his)stories challenges prevailing deficit models used for international students/migrants in the context of equality, diversity and

inclusion discourses within UK higher education, which tend to emphasise problematic issues of students' lack of performance and adjustment in comparison to their 'traditional', yet ill-defined peers (see Hockings et al., 2010). Revisiting Allan Findlay's work on the use of (auto-)biography within Hong Kong emigrant communities, such an awareness would have to start with the basic recognition that student/migrants are pro-active, socially embedded and intentional human beings who influence, and are influenced by, the social worlds in which they are located (Findlay, 1997).

## Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to critically reassess the ambiguous notion of resilience in relation to the growing phenomenon of international student mobilities and to analyse biographies which often contradict established idea(l)s about international students as privileged, elitist and mobile consumers of 'Western' higher education. Although the biographical approach is not without methodological problems, it has generated valuable insights into non-mainstream life histories and shed light on the heterogeneous make-up of student identities in present-day international higher education. Drawing on insights from the 'new mobilities paradigm', the study has shown that higher education institutions represent meaningful moorings which enable students to develop a sense of belonging and to assess, order and negotiate troubled pasts, challenging presents and possible futures. As such, this paper poses important questions about the role of higher education institutions in a globalised world, and greatly enriches the understanding of international students' underlying values and motivations in pursuing their studies abroad. This deeper and more holistic exploration of students' biographies has also challenged existing analyses emphasising the liminal nature of the 'student experience' within a narrowly defined 'student lifecycle' where 'resilience' is usually associated with the successful mastery of quantifiable, yet limited, notions of 'adjustment', 'acculturation' and 'retention'. Although the paper strongly argues in favour of student support systems and networks, it equally critiques deficit approaches towards international or otherwise 'non-mainstream' students which tend to place them in a passive and powerless position and thus fail to recognise the positive contributions these students can make to curricula, institutions' inclusion and 'widening participation' policies, as well as building

sustainable relationships with culturally heterogeneous local communities (Taylor & Scurry, 2011). With its focus on students enrolled in UK social science programmes, this research has also shown that students' stories, experiences and performances of resilience correspond directly with major trends, concepts and paradigms at the heart of social science research (i.e. identity, belonging, mobility, diversity, globalisation, nationhood, global citizenship, participation, etc.). As such, students' biographies represent valuable resources in developing innovative learning and teaching in increasingly diverse social science classroom settings. This observation is supported by Clegg's (2011) judgement that different groups of ('traditionally' excluded) students bring diverse life experiences and outsider knowledge that often shake up an intellectual field and hence adds independent voice and truth claims to a critical realist pedagogy without compromising disciplinary rigour and ontology. Although teaching through student biographies and potentially haunting experiences is an extremely sensitive issue, it is an area worthy of further exploration across a variety of social science curricula.

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