International Student Mobility: Approaches, Challenges And Suggestions For Further Research

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Abstract

This paper is dedicated to International Student Mobility (ISM) in Higher Education and contributes to the researchers’ growing interest towards various aspects of ISM. Such interest is justified by the fact that in the 1950s the worldwide number of students studying abroad is estimated to have been about 200,000, whereas by 2012 it increased to more than 2 million, at least in absolute terms. The paper is based on the results of exploratory research into the area and highlights gaps in the existing knowledge, conceptual inconsistencies and other challenges associated with researching ISM. However, the main point of the presentation is to raise academic awareness about new ideas associated with the topic, to share new, successful approaches to researching ISM and to suggest the nature of implications that ISM research findings may offer to the academic community.

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1. Introduction

Here With increasing number of students attending Higher Education (HE) institutions abroad, there is no question that International Student Mobility (ISM) is changing the global HE landscape. But various organizations, institutions and individuals understand student mobility differently, which complicates work of researchers and policy-makers. For example, it is difficult to evaluate the scope, the relevance and quality of research unless the

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particular type of mobility under investigation is precisely and explicitly defined. Furthermore, if research lacks an accurate definition of the type of mobility under investigation, policy-makers informed by such research are likely to make inappropriate generalizations.

On the other hand, different understandings of the terminology initiate the exchange of ideas and stimulate discussion about what ISM actually entails. Taking advantage of this opportunity, one of the aims of this paper is to highlight gaps in the existing knowledge, conceptual inconsistencies and other challenges associated with researching ISM. The paper does not aim to provide an exhaustive list of terms or research approaches associated with ISM but merely to demonstrate the range and the diversity of the definitions and concepts available. Other aims include sharing of the new, successful approaches to researching ISM and to suggest the nature of implications that ISM research findings may offer to the academic community.

While global mobility of students is currently under the attention of supra-national agencies its executive definition is rather ambiguous even in the official documents. For example, the [1] European Parliament and Council (2006) explain International Student Mobility as ‘a period of learning abroad (formal and non-formal), or mobility undertaken by individual young people or adults, for the purposes of formal and non-formal learning and for their personal and professional development’ (p. 8). Since one does not have to be a student to participate in non-formal learning or personal development, this definition appears generic for all mobile individuals involved in any kind of learning process and not specific to students. Students, on the other hand, are different from informal learners as they seek tertiary education that can be documented and subsequently recognized. Of course, improvements have been made over the years and in the [2] Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009) European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education refer to the process of academic mobility as ‘a study or training period abroad’ (p. 4). However, most researchers agree that such definition remains too generic.

The most obvious property of mobility, the relocation from one place to another, is referred to as geographical mobility and can be divided into intra- and international mobility. Intra-national mobility takes place within a country whilst international mobility crosses national borders and is also known as transnational. This paper focuses only on mobility of students, which is a part of academic mobility, and not of overall geographical mobility of individuals. International, academic mobility of students can be virtual (computer-mediated, long-distance) or physical (also called spatial or geographical). From the point of view of socio-politics, ISM can be inward (into a country) or outward (out of a country). All these types of mobility’s are educational processes, of course, but they often entail different experiences, like virtual and physical academic mobility’s, and result in different outcomes.

ISM tends to deal with student flows in terms of numbers and is complicated by severe measurement problems [3] (Kelo et al., 2006). The authors explain that many publications of international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), or the European Commission (Education and Training Division) convey the impression that there is no shortage of data on international student mobility. However, this impression is misleading because the statistics provided by the individual countries for the purposes of collection by these supra-national organizations report on foreign students, using the foreign nationality of students as a measure of mobility. However, research indicates [4] (Findlay and King, 2012) that international, foreign, overseas, mobile students and sojourners are not the same group of students, though certain characteristics may overlap. Such discrepancies stand in the way of shared readings of the statistical data, weaken comparability of findings and decrease reliability of ISM as a research field. In addition, much of the research tends to be decontextualized despite the established lists of the characteristics describing the student flows. For example, unless specified, it is difficult to pinpoint groups of students within post-secondary education that researchers take into account: university students, college students, further education students, other groups of students or all the tertiary level students.

Having said that, it must be acknowledged that more recent publications display higher awareness of the debate. One of many examples is the difference on how the topic of student mobility is treated in Key Data on Education in Europe published by the European Commission. The 2007 edition [5] only mentions overall student mobility
without explaining who the mobile students in question are. The 2012 publication of the Key Data series [6] differentiates between mobility facilitated by the exchange programmes and degree mobility. This change indicates that in the past few years ‘student mobility’ became an ‘umbrella term’ that hides a number of related processes that result in education in a foreign country.

Analyses of the existing literature point out that ISM is studied across several academic fields and it is impossible to pinpoint one agreed way of defining mobility. The majority of studies on ISM is concentrated in the following areas: Migration Studies, Education, Sociology of HE. Harnessing this flexibility, researchers seem to re-negotiate mobility depending not only on their professional affiliations, but also on their scientific domains with certain ontological and epistemological traditions. This paper outlines the range and variety of the conceptual platforms and research approaches that provide more or less successful practices for researching ISM only from the point of view of Migration Studies and Education.

According to the systematic review of the literature [7] (Wells, 2012) most of the research studies on ISM are concentrated in the field of Migration Studies. The aim of ISM research in the from the point of view of Migration Studies is to understand the principles of student flows and examine the influences that direct the flows, also known as push and pull factors.

Traditionally, pull factors are associated with the students’ desire to move abroad, while push factors are those that make them want to leave their home countries. Despite its deserved place in research of ISM push and pull factors analysis should be used with caution. One of the reasons is ‘reverse push and pull factors’ as outlined by [8] Li and Bray (2007). The authors point out that home countries may also have strong pull factors to hold some students back; such as linguistic and cultural security, social and family ties, lower cost of living, etc. At the same time, students that consider or already participate in education abroad are very likely to experience the influences of various push factors while in host countries, but the responses to these influences depend on a highly individualized and complex set of characteristics.

In addition, [9] King (2002) warns that Migration Studies recognizes short-term, long-term and permanent migration patterns, in which mobile students are discussed as short-term migrants. This might be a valid approach for the students travelling within exchange programmes who study abroad for a short time, but the situation needs more thorough investigation for the students who travel independently, on their own accord, as they may be short-term, long-term or even permanent migrants. King admits that even though the temporal characteristics are not defined, permanent migrants go through different processes than short-term migrants. Therefore, researching all mobile students as short-term migrants biases research findings. King suggests an interesting alternative of ’shuttle’ migration, which describes more or less frequent, repeated travelling to one or more foreign countries.

It is also customary to associate ISM with human capital and its dissemination across national borders ([10, 11] OECD Publishing, 2013; [12] Kehm and Teichler, 2007). Even though the influence of human capital theory on ISM is supported by abundant evidence it also introduces some of its inherent challenges into the field. It is believed that many of the students who study abroad choose to stay and work in the country of their education [13] (Dreher, 2013). In this case mobile students are seen as highly skilled migrants and carriers of human capital into their host countries.

However, there are several problems with this idea. First, it is not clear if the mobile students are already highly skilled migrants when they first come to the host country, or if they become highly skilled as a result of their education in the country. Second, this idea is built on the assumption that theory of human capital applies to education abroad in the same way it applies to education at home, which [14] Hadler (2006) among others finds inaccurate. Third, it is undefined how long a graduate has to stay or work in the country of their education in order to qualify as a migrant. After all, students may choose to work in the host country for a period of time and then leave or vice versa, return home, go to other countries and then work in the country of education. In light of these
criticisms the theory of human capital alone is not an effective framework for the study of student mobility.

Connecting student mobility with human capital theory calls for the investigation of the phenomenon known as human capital flight or, colloquially, 'brain drain'. Despite the popular belief that a large number of out-coming mobile students cause countries to lose their collective human capital there is no scientific evidence to support this view. Such an opinion is likely to have originated from the belief that mobile students behave like highly skilled permanent migrants, who tend to stay in their host countries. The difference between highly-skilled permanent migrants and mobile students is that (with exceptions) migrants are likely to have been educated in their home countries; many of them do not intend to live in their home country again; and the aim of their relocation is work, not education. Students, on the other hand, might develop their human capital in the host country during the course of education. Furthermore, even if they do not return home immediately, there are no 'rules' as to how long an individual can work abroad before their home country can count them as contributing to 'brain drain'. These differences point out that while connections between highly-skilled migrants and 'brain drain' may be viable, there is no credible evidence showing that mobile students contribute to 'brain drain'.

But the main criticism of the push and pull factors analysis as a research framework, for ISM is its focus on external (macro) pressures that influence the mobile students and ignores individual motivations. Hadler (2006) is one of the authors warning that the essence of mobility experience lies in the interplay between the 'macro-level circumstances related to overall movements ... and individual, micro-level explanations that emphasize personal circumstances and characteristics' (p. 112). Citing Esser (1988), Hadler (2006, p. 115) advocates an actor-oriented approach to ISM that emphasizes individual perceptions as stronger motivators and recognizes external influences only as important in terms of their effect on an individual. Similarly, [15] De Haas (2009) finds that human agency is often obscured in ISM research, traditionally concerned with numbers, and explains that push and pull factors may direct and define student flows but do not cause them. The debate about the relative importance of the macro and micro levels influencing student mobility is also mirrored in Sociology of Higher Education as the dichotomy of 'agency' vs. 'structure'.

However, decisions of the 'agents' that take place on the individual level are the most complicated to investigate because in this case research needs to discuss choices and motivations of the mobile students that often deal with students' visions of the past, their perceptions of the present and their ambitions about the future. Since these processes are in constant change and are subject to multiple interpretations, they are difficult to capture and to research. According to [16] Guth (2008) studies of the individual levels of mobility sometimes lack a clear aim and tend to be descriptive.

One possible lens to challenge the attitude towards the students as a passive group is to locate student mobility research within the student-inhabited transnational social fields. [17] Gargano (2009) explains that transnational social fields are spaces of interlocking networks of international students where ideas, practices, and social networks can be organized, exchanged, and transformed. She points out that 'the lack of robust concepts that can capture international student experiences and identity reconstructions is to blame for homogenizing and generalizing the negotiations of international students when great dimensions of difference actually exist' (p. 332).

She argues that viewing the mobile students as members of their social networks allows positioning them not only in geographikal and institutional localities but in the social structure as well as viewing each individual as a member of their transnational community. This approach allows her to capture not only the phenomenon of relocation but also the dynamics of the relationships that are constantly re-negotiated among the members. Wells (2012) recognized the potential of the idea and followed with the empirical research and examples of possible methodologies that situate the experiences of the students within their transnational social networks and not only within geographical localities.

Tracing back the idea of transnational spaces, work by [18] Collins (2008) clarified that transnational spaces are situated between students’ home countries and countries of education. Collins reasons that mobility is a
Participation in the transnational social fields indicates a shift in student behaviour, possibly due to the substantial increase of mobile students coming to England in the past decades. While earlier work, done in the 1990s (for example, see [19] Berry, 1997), demonstrated that international students tended to congregate according to their nationality and linguistic proficiency, participants of Wells’s (2012) research showed that they made connections with people based on convenience, gender and commonality of interest (e.g. subject area) regardless of country of origin, nationality or native language. This finding also contributes to research on the English language as the world’s lingua franca. Linguists notice that most speakers of English worldwide are non-native, and their communication minimizes the importance of language proficiency and maximizes communicative competence. This has implications for the English language teachers and curriculum designers in both home and host countries.

There is overwhelming evidence that decisions and choices of students concerning exchange and degree mobility are grounded in their social networks and are primarily influenced by recommendations from friends who have had relevant experience. But some students have wider access to these networks than others. This is why creation of new mobile students networks; support groups, and ‘buddy programmes’ should be a priority for the local branches of international student organizations such as the European Student Union who seek to facilitate mobility.

[20] Ferro (2006) incorporates the idea of researching the relocation of highly skilled migrants as a part of the holistic migration experience or a ‘migratory project’ that includes in-depth investigations of the participants’ backgrounds, contexts and motivations. While the findings are not relevant to the current research because Ferro’s work is detached from education and takes place among a narrowly defined group of highly skilled migrants, the framework of migration projects provides a useful methodological tool for study of ISM. (For more details see Wells, 2012.)

Taking into account newer sources, contributions to ISM research from other fields became more prominent and more valuable. For example, now ISM is also studied from the point of view of Education, Sociology, Psychology, Network research and even Tourism. Since each field has its own ontological and epistemological traditions, the diversity of research approaches results in a variety of findings. Analyses and comparisons of these findings stimulate an on-going dialogue in the research community.

Particularly noticeable was a shift from study of the student mobility as a subset of Migration Studies to the study of mobility as a socially embedded practice. In Sociology ISM became recognized as a way to gain personal cultural capital. Especially prominent in this respect are works by Rachel Brooks and Joanne Waters published in the last decade. Working predominantly with UK students they suggest that in view of the deflation of university degrees international education has become a distinction strategy for middle-class British families. This shift relies on the established theory of formative relationship between individuals and their socio-cultural surroundings and suggests using Sociology of HE for the theorization of academic mobility. The theory and the topic are bonded so firmly that even distinguished specialists in Migration Studies pay increasingly more attention to this sociological aspect of student mobility.

As of late more attention is being paid to the evaluation of research practices in ISM. In the summer of 2012 Research in Comparative and International Education (Volume 7, Number 1, 2012) dedicated an entire issue to examining the tradition of researching education abroad from the platform of comparative education scholarship ([21] Teichler, 2012). Even a cursory look at the titles reveals that exploration of student motivations; experiences and outcomes of educational mobility remain at the top of the researchers’ priorities.
The old challenges in the field of ISM research and the new developments have implications for further research. The next logical step in research is likely to establish links between these stages of education abroad, identifying how these stages influence each other. Some examples include: interdisciplinary review of the existing literature, more reliable and internationally comparable statistical reporting and exploratory research into decision-making process of the applicants and their families. One of the many questions around ISM topic is the extent to which the HE institutions, the national or the supra-national agencies should control student mobility. Arguments developed around such questions have potential to further strengthen the field of ISM.

References


