

Abstract

As higher education, migration, and mobility intertwine in increasingly complex ways, we need a new way to analyze international student mobility (ISM). Unpacking ISM's "messiness" brings to light two key interfacing continua: first, the discretion to move, and second, opportunity through movement. Recognizing this confluence not only better explains the reproduction, amplification, dissolution, and restructuring of privilege in international education, but also highlights the need to visibilize students from displaced, refugee, and forced-migrant backgrounds.

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International Student Mobility, Opportunity, and the Voluntariness of Migration: A New Conceptual Approach

Lisa Ruth Brunner, Bernhard Streitwieser and Rajika Bhandari

Internationally mobile students are often positioned as relatively homogenous with common motivations and experiences. However, the changing interplay between higher education, mobility, and (im)migration requires us to rethink this outdated approach.

As Global North higher education systems increasingly depend on international student tuition fees, and governments depend on those students as future "ideal" immigrants, higher education is now embedded in a deepening education-immigration, or "edugration," nexus. Higher education institutions also provide global pathways to refugee protection, a growing focus of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) Global Compact on Refugees. These and other shifts present important implications for the cross-disciplinary study of international student mobility (ISM).

ISM's "Messiness"

ISM refers to the physical movement of individuals acquiring academic experience in another country. While ISM has long been overlooked in migration studies and undertheorized or approached uncritically in international education, it has become a key topic in both fields. Recent critical insights reveal intricacies and challenges related to its study. Changing technologies, regional integration processes, and partnership structures now complicate who counts as an international student. Privileging the study of *international* mobility over *intranational* mobility raises questions about the distinctiveness of crossing often colonial state borders. The wide-ranging motivations for, and experiences of, ISM defy simple classifications. Echoing Hans de Wit's critique of the "problematic sloppiness" associated with the term "internationalization," we suggest that ISM also suffers from interrelated areas of "messiness."

Messy Terms

Terms hold discursive significance in their organization and communication of values. ISM-related terms are not just used inconsistently. They also obscure the complexity and power relations that are inherent to (im)migration. For example, as "edugration" expands, it is becoming more difficult to distinguish between internationally mobile "students," "migrants," and "immigrants." The UNHCR's Eurocentric and arguably outdated legal definition of a "refugee" is also increasingly critiqued for serving the needs of

states rather than of forced migrants, and of excluding a wider spectrum of movement from protection., e.g., displacement due to climate crises.

Messy Data

ISM-related data varies between countries, where categories may be conflated and thus complicate international comparisons and public discourse, and is also incomplete. A dearth of statistics on international student transitions to permanent residency, for example, obstructs understanding of “edugration” patterns. Meanwhile, refugees who engage in education are often not counted as international students and thus tabulated and theorized separately.

Messy Practices

Higher education institutions crudely differentiate between categories of internationally mobile students for tuition assessment, scholarship eligibility, and other administrative purposes. “Domestic” students with migrant backgrounds are arbitrarily separated from international students, while those who are undocumented, stateless, members of transborder Indigenous nations, or otherwise not easily classified, challenge domestic/international binaries. Meanwhile, asylum-seekers and recently resettled refugees may be considered “domestic” students, yet they require “international” student services, further complicating student affairs and funding models.

A Reconceptualization of ISM

We believe this messiness is partially due to a lack of a nuanced analytical approach to ISM’s entanglement with migration. In response, we propose a new theorization of ISM based on two key conceptualizations.

The first, presented by Bernhard Streitwieser, splits ISM into three distinct categories. Category one is “mobility for enlightenment,” or voluntary international education. Category two is “mobility for opportunity,” or international education driven by economic migration. The third category is called “mobility for survival,” or international education undertaken as forced migration.

The second approach, presented by Marta Bivand Erdal and Ceri Oeppen, positions forced and voluntary migration as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy.

Building on these conceptualizations, we identify two structuring elements of ISM: first, the discretion to move, which addresses the voluntariness of mobility; and second, movement’s degree of impact on opportunity itself.

The Discretion to Move

Discretion is often presented as a clear-cut distinction in migration: a refugee is forced to migrate, while an international student has agency. However, we suggest the voluntariness of movement in ISM needs to be understood as a *spectrum* containing a wide range of possible degrees of discretion. Importantly, we must ensure that refugees, forced migrants, and otherwise displaced students are included in ISM analyses, and also recognize the impact of historical and current-day forces of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism on ISM, as well as their impacts on the voluntariness of movement.

Opportunity through Movement

ISM is often discussed and instrumentalized based on its economic benefits at the level of an individual. But common notions that are too often employed in discussions of ISM, such as upward mobility and Bourdieusian capital theory, remain too simplistic. We suggest viewing opportunity through ISM as a spectrum, too, thus making space for a wide range of possible degrees of opportunity, educational or otherwise. This means that we need to recognize the relative way ISM operates, where social markers are not static but rather (re)produced through mobility, and the notion of “opportunity” is highly contextual.

Lisa Ruth Brunner is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Center for Migration Studies at the University of British Columbia, Canada. E-mail: lisa.brunner@ubc.ca.

Bernhard Streitwieser is an associate professor of international education and international affairs at the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at George Washington University, United States, and director of GW's Refugee Educational Advancement Laboratory. E-mail: streitwieser@email.gwu.edu.

Rajika Bhandari is the founder of Rajika Bhandari Advisors, United States. E-mail: rajika@rajikabhandari.com.

The Interface of Discretion and Opportunity

In our reconceptualization, ISM is structured by the interface of these two spectra: discretion and opportunity. In other words, the “*discretion to move*” spectrum intersects with the “*opportunity through movement*” spectrum in important and various ways that result in a broader constellation of possible forms of ISM.

For example, in horizontal credit mobility, where there is an exchange between similarly ranked institutions in countries with similar GDPs, participation in ISM is likely relatively optional, and its impact on opportunity is relatively marginal. A student’s social or cultural capital may increase, but their international engagement is voluntary. In “education,” however, immigration becomes a particular form of social mobility through access to new labor markets and permanent residency. A student’s discretion to move is more constrained due to uneven national economies, and the movement’s impact on their opportunity is likely more significant. Lastly, in forced ISM, a refugee student engages in ISM out of necessity or in order to escape persecution, while the movement can carry outsized influence on their opportunity.

In observing these broad patterns of discretion and opportunity, key to our conceptualization is the recognition that individual and situational variations will always be at play, hence we stress the importance of viewing discretion and opportunity on intersecting spectra.

What Needs to Change

As ISM’s societal functions change in relation to global migration, scholars and practitioners alike need to rethink the conceptual tools they use to grapple with what has become an increasingly messy set of terms, data, and practices. Rethinking implies that our current purveyors of mobility data, such as the Institute of International Education’s annual Open Doors Report and UNESCO’s Global Education Monitoring Report, need to reinvent how they tabulate the data on which researchers in various fields like international education and refugee studies rely. Today we can no longer exclude forced migrants from discussions of ISM, just as we can no longer assume that ISM is always associated with upward mobility. ▲