

‘It was always the plan’: international study as ‘learning to migrate’

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Abstract (max 300 words)

International student mobility has mainly been theorised in terms of cultural capital accumulation and its prospective benefits on returning home following graduation. Yet, despite a growing body of work in this area, most research on post-study mobility fails to recognise that the social forces that generate international student mobility also contribute to lifetime mobility plans. Moreover, these forces produce at least four types of post-study destination, of which returning ‘home’ is only one option. Our findings challenge the idea that a circular trajectory is necessarily the ‘desired’ norm. In line with wider migration theory we suggest that return may even be seen as failure. Instead we advance the idea that cultural and social capital acquired through international studies is cultivated for onward mobility and may be specifically channelled towards goals such as an international career. We contribute a geographically nuanced conceptual frame for understanding the relation between international student mobility and lifetime mobility aspirations. By building on studies that highlight the role of family and social networks in international student mobility, we illustrate how influential familial and social institutions – both in the place of origin and newly encountered abroad – underpin and complicate students’ motivations, mobility aspirations and life planning pre- and post-study. We argue for a fluidity of life plans and conclude by discussing how geographies of origin matter within students’ lifetime mobility plans.

Key words

Pre- and post-study mobility, lifetime plans, UK, negotiating transition, international students and global mobility

'It was always the plan': international study as 'learning to migrate'

Introduction

It is well-established that international study is an important practice used to reproduce social advantage from one generation to another. Many of the world's growing population of 4.5 million international students do not, however, return home after study (IIE, 2015). This raises the possibility that the drivers of international student mobility also motivate post-study migration to other destinations. Yet the links between student mobility and post-study migration have been given little attention.

Along with engaging with current debates on student propensities for life planning (Brooks and Everett 2008), this paper seeks to deepen understanding of the relationship between international student mobility and subsequent mobilities. One of our original contributions to the topic is in showing how the geography of what happens during international study matters in renegotiating this relationship. The intersection of pre-study life planning and aspirations for post-study mobility occurs not only in relation to the cultural significance of mobility as embedded in people's origins, but also in the complex and diverse understandings attached to post-study mobility developed in the social milieu of the place of foreign study.

The next section of this paper reviews how international student mobility has been theorised, before introducing our methodology. We then draw on the results of one of the largest questionnaire surveys ever conducted amongst international students in the UK to contextualise and deconstruct the meanings of mobility revealed in our in-depth interviews. In particular we examine the influential role of family and social networks in shaping students' life plans, as well as highlighting the fluidity of their mobility trajectories. The paper concludes by discussing how geographies of origin influence international students' lifetime mobility aspirations, and how international study disrupts and complicates lifecourse mobility plans.

Linking international student mobility to life plans

The literature is replete with studies of the drivers and motivations for international student mobility (Collins et al 2014; Prazeres 2013; Waters and Brooks 2011). In the vast majority of studies, international student mobility (ISM) is interpreted in isolation from other mobilities. Many researchers present student migration as the outcome of individual decision-making that weighs the benefits of engaging in international study against a range of socio-economic costs (Baláz and Williams 2004). While for some the educational sojourn abroad has a thrill-seeking appeal, most research presents international education as motivated by a search for better future employment prospects and career development (Robertson *et al.* 2011). Other researchers have argued that student mobility is tied to motivations for social and cultural capital accumulation (Waters and Brooks 2011).

Researchers often assume that student migration is linked to a longer-term strategy to return to the country of origin. Waters (2006), for example, demonstrates how young people are motivated to attend a university abroad to gain cultural and social capital that can be converted into economic capital upon their return home. Others hint at cultural and social capital accumulation leading to opportunities to stay in the country of study (Van Bouwel et al 2014). Staying or returning are therefore

represented as a geographical binary (Li et al 1996) with other possible outcomes (onward mobility to a third country) marginalised in the conceptualisation of international student mobility (ISM).

Although some scholars have noted the existence of a relationship between ISM and life planning (Beech, 2014; Findlay *et al.* 2012; Marcu 2015), evidence of career and life planning prior to international study remains scarce. Marcu, for example, has suggested that ISM is deployed by students and their families as a longer term strategy “to enter an international career and develop an internationally mobile trajectory” (2015, 74). It is of course important to note that, while some students engage in lifetime mobility planning, many form no long-term plan before leaving their parental home. Others find that their long-term desires and imaginary life mobilities are disrupted by personal circumstances encountered during their studies. There is therefore a complex relation between so-called life plans and the mobilities that merge over the lifecourse (Collins and Shubin, 2015). There is therefore a need, as Collins *et al.* (2016) have noted, to establish a more nuanced account of the relationship between ISM and post-study plans. This chimes with Bozionelos *et al.* (2015) who found that experiential factors, social networks, family pressure, previous experiences and employment opportunities all contributed to the likelihood of students considering a career abroad, but who also found that the practice of engaging in international study in itself “can trigger thoughts of an international career” (2015, 1429).

ISM not only places people in a new educational context, but it also positions them within a different social and cultural milieu. This in turn can prompt consideration of new post-study destinations and trajectories (Collins *et al.* 2014, 2016). Once abroad, the social networks in which students become immersed, inevitably shape their views of living and working internationally. Robertson *et al.* (2011) found that education abroad influenced students to reconsider and change their initial plans. Gomes (2015) goes further, reporting that international students view post-study international mobility as a taken-for-granted trajectory, with aspirations for “unlimited global mobility” (2015, 10). Rather than viewing their mobility as delimited by national borders, Gomes (2015) found that international study transformed the worldview of many of those he interviewed with them seeing the world as an open book to be explored wherever opportunities arose.

In summary, three key points emerge from the research literature. First, while most research on international student mobility discusses it in isolation from other mobilities, there is emerging recognition that the social forces that produce it also contribute to lifetime mobility trends. Second, the view that ISM leads either to return to the country of origin or to staying in the country of study has been increasingly challenged by evidence of other outcomes, including onward mobility to a specific third country for work or settlement (Soon 2012) and global mobility (where the goal is not settlement in any one country, but rather achievement of onward transnational mobility across many countries). Third, the literature suggests that not only do the drivers underpinning initial international student mobility drive post-study moves, but so too does the social environment of study. This is a significant site of novelty in the research reported in this paper. While others have researched post-study lives (Collins *et al.* 2016), our conceptual contribution probes how the experience of international study results in the renegotiation of the meanings (some inherited from pre-study imaginings) of future post-study mobility. The approach therefore recognises that students, like other mobile people, are ‘subjects in transit’ (Clifford 1994) whose ‘existence is always futural and projective’ (Collins and Shubin 2015,

98). In what follows we explore how places and times of study are transformative in re-shaping what it means to 'return home', 'to stay', to 'move to a third country' or to seek 'global mobility'.

Methodology and context

The researchers conducted an online survey between January and March 2015 amongst 3300 international students enrolled in ten UK universities. This was followed with semi-structured interviews with 30 students, as well as 12 key stakeholder interviews. The evidence base of this paper draws mainly on the student interviews, although reference is made to the online survey.

Three main criteria were used to select institutions for the survey: location (representing the four nations of the UK as well as the binary distinction of London versus the rest of the country), diversity (the proportion of non-UK domiciled students) and University rankings (using the Times World Higher rankings). In order to participate, students had to be normally domiciled outside the UK yet studying in the UK for their entire course (i.e. not exchange students). Interviewees were selected to represent students from a range of institutions (within our sample), levels of study, gender, as well as place of origin (EU/overseas). The researchers cross-checked their work against the 2013/14 student Higher Education Statistics Agency dataset to ensure that major non-EU sending countries (China, India, Nigeria and the USA) were included in the interviews. While the online survey attracted responses from 119 countries, the interviews were restricted to six students from within the EU and 24 from non-EU countries. We spoke with eight Chinese students, five from the United States and two from India, with the rest drawn from locations in Asia, South America, the Middle East and Australasia. While desiring that the interviews would capture the diversity of the UK international student body, the purpose of the interviews was to achieve deeper understanding of the meanings given to mobility by students from varied backgrounds. Following coding of transcripts, interviews were read and re-read multiple times to elicit the key meanings linking motivations for undertaking an initial international move to expectations of later mobilities. All student voices are anonymized, and institutional confidentiality maintained by only referring to the student's country of origin and their level of study.

Before listening to individual voices, we briefly identify from the wider questionnaire survey some aspects of the context within which the narrative is set. Overall, 40% of respondents expected to return home within five years of graduating, suggesting that while some international students can be represented as 'migrating to learn', many more (60%) are to some extent 'learning to migrate' through the practice of international study (Li *et al.* 1996). Students from China were the most likely to anticipate that their studies would end with a return home (59%) while only 24% of EU students expected to be back in their home country in five years' time. Given the perception of many Chinese students that future career opportunities in China were bright relative to other parts of the world, and also the pre-Brexit timing of the survey, these responses are plausible.

From the perspective of this paper, the finding that 37% of students anticipated moving to a third country after graduation (rather than returning home or staying in UK) is really important, raising interesting questions about the links between ISM and subsequent international migration. Equally, the finding that 79% of respondents had already formed ideas about their desired place of residence

post-study (which we caution is not the same as life-planning) could be interpreted as being compatible with Marcu's (2015) suggestion that student mobility may influence life planning. The survey also showed that the majority of students anticipated that ISM could be the first step in launching an international career (61% declared this as a very important driver of their decision to study in the UK). In detailed statistical analysis not presented here, variables such as gender and level of study were shown to be associated with the likelihood of wishing to remain in UK, but did not command statistical significance when multivariate statistical models were built including more powerful explanatory variables such as place of origin and motivations for international study.

Using semi-structured interviews, we now investigate in more detail whether pre-study plans for ISM are nested within life-mobility aspirations.

Life planning and the pursuit of an international career

Interviews with international students confirm that the decision to enrol for education in the UK can be part of a life plan to pursue an international career. Tabitha, for example, shows how international education is just one step in her plan for an international career:

This particular course wasn't really available back home and I had always wanted to leave India and settle somewhere else. So, it was a natural progression for me. I have an internship starting at the end of the month ... based in London. So I'm hoping that will lead to a job; that is the plan.... hopefully if it works out the way I hope it's going to work out. This was always the plan. (Tabitha, female master's student, Indian)

Much like Tabitha, Ashley's desire to remain abroad following graduation is tied to her prior motivations for international education:

I've had in my mind for years now that I wanted to travel for my job and live in different countries, so I think having an international school on my CV is what will help me get that. (Ashley, undergraduate student, American)

This highlights how an international education is viewed by students as a step towards gaining the necessary cultural, educational and mobility capitals to find work overseas, whether for improved economic conditions or for pursuit of an internationally mobile lifestyle (King *et al.* 2011). North American and European students in particular represented international mobility as both a logical step in their career progression as well as an opportunity for world travel. When asked whether she intended to pursue an international career, Marie replied:

Yes, definitely, a very international career. I want to travel and see the world a bit. (Marie, undergraduate student, French)

In their narratives, Marie and other students strategically integrated their career plans with their aspirations for world travel. This complication of the drivers underpinning mobility trajectories is in line with Brooks *et al.* (2012) who noted that personal lifestyle aspirations may inspire a career abroad, rather than an international career being seen as an end in itself. This complication of meanings

sets students from North America and the EU apart from students from African and Latin American countries. The latter often reported the pursuit of overseas employment in more pragmatic terms, such as a lack of economic opportunities in their countries of origin.

Despite much evidence of links between student mobility and life planning, there were others that had no pre-determined plans following graduation, other than (often involuntary) return to their home country due to the imminent expiry of their UK visa. Phoebe, for instance, when asked about her plans for the future admitted that “I don’t know what I’m going to do when I get back [to the United-States]”. There seemed to be less engagement in life planning amongst students from more privileged backgrounds (Brooks and Everett 2008). We turn now to unpack the role of family and social networks in students’ pre- and post-study mobility aspirations.

Familial and social expectations for an international career

Although students expressed individual aspirations to pursue an international career, it was evident that the social institution of the family played a very influential role in shaping prior motivations for mobility. It was not therefore surprising to find geographical variations in the cultural role that the family played in structuring migration (Soon 2012). Anna, for example, had alternated between living with her expatriate parents in Hong Kong and attending high school in Switzerland prior to undertaking her tertiary studies in the UK. Anna recalled a recent conversation with her parents (who still resided in Hong Kong):

I was actually having a conversation with my parents a few weeks ago and I was expressing how I really wanted to come back to Hong Kong and I wanted to work there, and my parents just shut that down saying, like, ‘you’re young, you should be having an international career, you should be, like, exploring the world, you shouldn’t be in Hong Kong, this is your comfort zone, you shouldn’t be here.’ So that’s what kind of shifted my views towards going back to Hong Kong. They made it very clear: ‘we will not support you if you come home, but we’ll support you if you go somewhere else’. Like ok, fine [laughs]. (Anna, undergraduate student, Swiss).

This illustrates that an interest in an international career and lifestyle is not only – or in this case necessarily – self-motivated by students, but perhaps surprisingly, can be strongly structured by parents. In encouraging Anna to remain abroad in order to ‘explore the world’, her parents were extending the initial drive to accumulate cultural capital through international study to one that included cultural capital accumulation from subsequent international work. The evidence of family influencing students’ post-study career trajectories through encouraging international work was replicated in many interviews, although the reasons (such as filial piety) for doing so varied depending on the student’s place of origin, the economic situation in that place of origin and perceptions of what was deemed ‘best’ by parents in terms of their life aspirations for the children (Marcu 2015).

For families from less economically-advantaged countries, an international education was represented as a way out of a precarious economic situation for the whole family, and it should not have therefore been surprising to find that the realisation of this involved parents encouraging onward post-study mobility to achieve a potentially lucrative international career. While a post-study international

trajectory seemed a self-evident objective for many families from Africa and Latin America, these aspirations were not always mutual or reciprocated by students from these countries. As Ricardo points out, any intention to deviate from this international trajectory incited a negative family reaction:

“I don’t think anyone would doubt that I will stay here in Europe to be honest. Every time I talk to my parents or my friends commenting that I am going back to Latin America they are always surprised that I would even consider it. They are expecting me to stay in Europe.” (Ricardo, Master’s student, Venezuelan)

Ricardo spoke for many students who attested the role of family in influencing their personal post-study mobility aspirations. The possibility of return was not only represented by many students as a sign of failure and disappointment to their families, but the need to secure a job following graduation was also understood as a necessity to pay off tuition fees and loans given by the family to support study abroad. Narratives also showed how life plans and mobility aspirations were often strongly contested and negotiated between students and other family members.

By contrast, for North American students, parents and friends mediated the student migration-lifetime mobility nexus in a very different way, reflecting the culturally and geographically distinctive nature of student-family relations. Consider the case of Ashley. When asked whether her parents expected her to remain abroad, she replied:

“I don’t think they expect me, but I think they all know. My dad has even said that once I came here, he knew that I would never live in the US again. Unless I have a job or future that puts me in a US city, I’m planning on staying over here. ... probably England, I wanted to move to London after school, that was kind of the plan.” (Ashley, undergraduate, American)

Ashley describes her move to London as part of her pre-study plans to pursue a career path overseas. While her father expected her to remain abroad, this was represented as an outcome of her independent planning rather than her parents’ expectations. Although North American students claimed to set their own life paths, we suspect that actions were rarely taken entirely independent of family. Most American students underlined that family was supportive – even if reluctantly so – of their decision to move.

If the analysis of transcripts thus far has helped to illustrate the diversity of meanings associated with student declarations of their intention to stay abroad, it would be wrong to ignore the voices of those who expected to return ‘home’. For some, it was argued that job prospects back home (eg in China) were better than elsewhere in the world, revealing that ‘going home’ should not automatically be read as ‘failure’. For others the desire to return ‘home’ related to developmental norms:

“It is our job basically to take back what we’ve learnt from here and to go back home and to bridge that gap in terms of opportunities and allowing people to access this [international education].” (Abayomi, Master’s student, Nigerian)

Abayomi’s comment suggests that return home was always envisaged as part of her pre-study plans. In fact, she recommends to prospective students:

“Before you even get here, you need to have a plan; an idea of what you might want to take out of it. So that when you’re [abroad], you are constantly reflecting and checking whether it is meeting your expectations and whether you need to change direction for the future.”

For Abayomi, the post-study plan needs to be continuously renegotiated vis-à-vis expectations *while* abroad to ensure that the initial values that triggered ISM were stable and in line with the values shaping future life mobility plans. Although deciding on a plan was considered essential to her in helping guide the international study process, she also pointed to the possibility of change in realigning her goals to achieve future aspirations and life plans.

Changes to mobility plans and ‘global’ aspirations

While many intended to implement their pre-study mobility plans on graduation, others explained how international study had changed their life plans (Robertson *et al.* 2011). Some students who initially intended to return home noted that instead they now wanted to stay. Badia provides one example:

“When I first came to the UK in 2008, my plan was to have the experience and go back. But I haven’t gone back! It has been six years at this point and to be honest, I consider this part of the world as my second home now. ... So I really would like to stay and work here.” (Badia, Master’s student, Turkish)

While for many students an international career was always part of their life mobility plans prior to ISM, for others like Badia the prospect of a career abroad arose during their international studies (Bozionelos *et al.* 2015). International higher education was described as a developmental and transitional period characterised by (self)discovery. Since international students tended to immerse themselves within a diverse social network of local and international students inside and outside the classroom, they were exposed and introduced to a wide suite of ideas and opportunities that diverged and converged and which provoked them to continually reassess their future plans. Some students explicitly reported how their study environment had contributed to shaping post-study opportunities (Collins *et al.* 2014, 2016). Revised career plans and mobility aspirations were often attributed to discussions and conversations with educators and fellow students. Suzanne illustrates this point:

“I want to stay in London. My partner works here and he’s on a two-year visa, and he’s also trying to get his employer to sponsor him to stay. We both really love it here, we both have felt like we made a home here, we have friends here, you know, we want to stay as long as we can.... So I could definitely see myself building a career here, you know, that would last decades.” (Suzanne, PhD student, Canadian)

Through the social networks acquired during their international experience, Suzanne and her partner had developed a sense of ‘home’ in London that incited them to ‘build a career’ there. Although Suzanne’s pre-study aspirations for an international lifestyle may have guided her post-study plans to remain in the UK, it seems that social networks created *during* her studies reinforced her desire to pursue work

overseas. We therefore note the fluidity of students' life mobility expectations and acknowledge that social and cultural capital gained during international studies can disrupt initial life plans and reconfigure future career aspirations.

Furthermore, some of the student narratives revealed that it is both complicated pre-study motivations (such as for adventure through an international career) as well as the lived experiences of studies abroad that inspired people to pursue a 'global' as opposed to an 'international' career. Shayna, for instance, explained how an international career would benefit her professional goals and development, but also how the experience of living abroad had expanded her mobility aspirations beyond particular borders:

“We've left it very wide open and I think because I lived abroad, I don't see my job or career path being in one location. I see it as pretty much 'anywhere as possible' in terms of going anywhere in the world and applying anywhere that I want.” (Shayna, PhD student, American)

Instead of envisioning a career limited to living in one particular country, Shayna represented a significant number of students who saw their future life plans through a global lens. This chimes with the idea of a “sense of unlimited global mobility” (Gomes 2015 10). In other words, student career aspirations need not be fixated on a particular country, but instead can be borderless and open. Thus, while life mobility plans are institutionally produced, they are not rigid; rather, they bend, curve, re-route and branch off in unexpected ways and directions through a new place-based experience.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the life mobility aspirations of international students enrolled at UK universities. It has been argued that students' life mobility aspirations are complex and culturally-produced in relation to geographically differentiated familial, social and political institutions. It is surprising that this linkage between drivers of student mobility and the drivers of lifetime mobility has not been more widely recognised. We posit that this may be because of the artificial categorisations of migration theory that separate 'temporary' international student mobility from theories of international labour migration. More profoundly, it may be because of a tendency in the literature to interpret time as externally-related to the migrant rather than temporally relational, individuals being affected by their situatedness with 'the capacity to be at once ahead (futural), having-been (past) and alongside oneself (present)' (Collins and Shubin, 2015, 98).

Our findings confirm that ISM is often a springboard for later international career mobility. Going beyond Waters (2006), our findings suggest that parents of international students from some countries not only encourage social capital accumulation through study abroad, but also shape the lifetime mobility of young people through setting expectations for their subsequent international migration. The 'family' as a culturally enacted institution operates like a compass for students, guiding and steering them (at times gently and other times more forcefully) in specific, strategic directions towards meeting longer-term goals and familial aspirations. As a result, familial expectations and aspirations *pre-study* were often also decisive in influencing students' mobility plans and trajectories *post-study*. However, since students themselves carry expectations of their international sojourn

that may not reflect the reality upon arrival in their study location, the pressure to meet parents' expectations sometimes conflicted with students' new personal orientations and inclinations.

Of course many other issues shaping post-study mobility/immobility emerge in the quotes that have not been unpacked here. Particularly significant were the regulatory mechanisms governing migration. These blocked opportunities for many to remain in UK after study, while paradoxically opening opportunities for others, such as Suzanne. A second interesting dimension was the geographical location of higher education institutions (Tindal et al, 2015). Some respondents (Ashley and Tabitha) noted that studying in or near London potentially could ease their subsequent entry to a global city labour market.

Emergent practices and social networks cultivated abroad, as well as external or unforeseen factors, also reconfigured and re-routed lifetime mobility aspirations in unexpected ways. Most notably the international experience of some students led them to envision their post-study mobility in a way that blurred and transcended borders. The survey and interviews confirmed the existence of aspirations for different types of geographical outcome: return, staying in the country of study, onward mobility to another country, and global mobility. While our contribution confirms that some 'seeds of migration' (Halfacree and Boyle 1993) are planted before international student mobility, it also underscores the importance of new aspirations for post-study mobilities emerging during international study. International educational sojourns, seen in this light, can be understood as an enabling practice, with cultural capital and social networks opening possibilities for onward migration to new destinations within the global labour market.

In terms of wider theorisation, education is just one of many transitions that intersect the lifecourse producing mobility both to places of study and from sites of study. International student mobility as a practice used to reproduce social advantage provides a particularly interesting point of juncture in this respect because international students considering transitions, to and from university, must negotiate tensions between different institutions – familial, social, political and educational. Resolution of these tensions influence students into different mobile trajectories that endure well-beyond their period of study. We have argued for recognition of a fluidity in life plans and mobilities, rather than advancing a singular model to explain all links between pre- and post-study mobility. The contours of institutional maps of meaning that we have presented reach well beyond the tradition of investigating only the meanings arising from the uneven global landscape of higher education (Waters and Brooks, 2011). Our focus on the student migration-lifetime mobility nexus has begun to open up an exciting panorama of the intersection between the desires driving international student mobility and the longer-term desires of familial, social and political institutions to reproduce advantage through subsequent life mobility trajectories.

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