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The New Politics of Global Academic Mobility and Migration



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EDITION

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Introduction: Global Academic Mobility and Migration – Between Reality and Fantasy

‘Mobility’ is all the rage in the academy too. Universities – in all corners of the globe – are busy scoping, planning and advertising mobility programmes, as an essential component of academics’ and students’ learning experience, whilst governments and regional bodies around the world are promoting mobility as crucial to learning in the new global economy. The world is on the move, and if it is not, it ought to be – at least if we take the policy rhetoric seriously.

(Robertson, 2010, p. 641)

An ever-booming field of study

Most volumes on academic and student mobility will start by reminding their readers that research on this phenomenon is scarce. In 2014 this assertion is not valid any longer. The last few years have witnessed an upsurge in the publication of volumes and journal issues on the topic (Gürüz, 2011; Brooks, Fuller & Waters, 2012; Erlich, 2012; Feyen & Krzaklewska, 2013; Kinginger, 2013; Huang, Finkelstein & Rostan, 2013; Machart & Dervin, 2014a; Van Mol, 2014; Gerhards Hans & Carlson, 2014, etc.). The *Journal of International Mobility* was set up in 2012 as well as a book series published with Peter Lang, entitled *Education Beyond Borders*. Since 2012 many conferences and seminars have taken place around the world: ICAMM 3 (organised by the editors of this volume in Malaysia in July 2012); a conference in French at the Université de Versailles-Saint-Quentin-Yvelines in December 2012; *Challenges of the International Mobility of the Highly Skilled in the 21st century* (Barcelona, Spain, February 2013); *Residence Abroad, Social Networks and Second Language Learning* (Southampton, UK, April 2013), and more recently Mainz University (Germany) organised a conference on *Academic Mobility – Challenges of Internationalization* (June 2014) and the University of Bologna a conference entitled *Teaching the Intercultural in Contexts of Student Mobility*. In July 2015 the conference *Culture of Study Abroad* will take place in Halifax (Canada).

There was a time, in the not so distant past, when it was easy to keep ‘control’ of what was happening in relation to Academic Mobility and Migration in academia. This era is definitely over. It is now obvious that the *quantum jump*

that “the field of academic mobility and migration” would witness as predicted by Kehm and Teichler (2007) or Dervin and Byram (2008) has already taken place. Yet it is a confused, confusing and multi-voiced move that seems to reflect more complex societal phenomena. In his article entitled “*The Subprime*” market and international higher education, Philip G. Altbach (2013), Director of the Center for International Higher Education in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, ventures an interesting comparison between the U.S. subprime mortgage crisis of 2008 which triggered repeated recessions around the world, and what is happening in higher education in relation to internationalisation. For the scholar, the current worldwide situation is between that of an ‘irrational exuberance’ and a ‘bubble’. Starting from this interesting analysis, this volume adopts a critical perspective towards academic mobility and migration. The authors contribute to reviewing some of the commonsensical and neo-liberal discourses on internationalisation and mobility/migration in the 21st century – giving a more realistic snapshot. They thus concentrate on what we call ‘the new politics of Academic Mobility and Migration’.

Beyond figures and praise?

We could continue this introduction by reviewing – yet again – the “impressive” figures of internationalisation (see e.g. Kandiko & Weyers, 2013). But actually these figures are not as imposing as they could/should be in our era of accelerated globalisation. For example, J. P. Lassegard (2013) discusses the case of Japanese students whose number has declined steadily since the mid-2000s. The success of academic mobility is sold by institutions and supra-national entities such as the EU but let us bear in mind that only 2% of the world student population is able to move and that even amongst movers not everyone has the same opportunities in terms of length, programme and destination. We could also ‘worship’ naively mobile individuals and remain uncritical towards their experiences of mobility. Yet many scholars have demonstrated that mobility can do very little to unsettle and/or change mobile students and/or academics... or even be a real asset on their CVs.

One of the latest interesting changes and additions to academic and student mobility/migration is the fact that traditional destination countries (“Western” countries to take a shortcut) are increasingly overtaken by education hubs such as China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. As such, in 2010, 86,900 international students were registered in Malaysia (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011) and the government is planning to attract 200,000 by 2020, generating 2 billion ringgits (650 million US dollars) (*MySinchiew*, July 2012). The emphasis is largely on Muslim students (Machart & Dervin, 2014b) and in

2009, the Malaysian Minister of Higher Education explained in Dubai: “We’re providing access to our higher education, places in our universities, because we believe that this is one way of contributing towards the development of our fellow Muslim countries” (*Bernama*, 2009). Many chapters examine the context of Malaysia in this book. The current shift in world powers is slowly showing in relation to academic mobility and migration too.

Media discourses on mobility: a British example

To our knowledge few publications on academic mobility and migration have looked into how the media deal with this specific type of mobility – a voice always interesting to take into account (Maffesoli & Strohl, 2014). As any volume on academic mobility and migration represents a snapshot of an era – things evolve quickly – we would like to listen to what the media have reported about internationalisation recently before turning to some latest research. This represents an attempt to reduce the chasm between what we researchers work on and what the media discuss. We are well aware that taking the UK as an example will earn us the reputation of being Eurocentric, yet we are ready to take the risk as this European country has been one of the motors of academic and student mobility/migration for many decades. In 2013 alone the UK had the second largest cohort of foreign students of any OECD country...

The Guardian, a British national daily newspaper, reported regularly about internationalisation in the first two quarters of 2014.

- The year opened with an article written by the Director of education at British Council India (23.1) about his worries concerning the 25% reduction of Indian students recruited to the UK. He blamed the government’s reforms especially in relation to work during study but also high cost.
- On 31.1 an article reported on the fact that all Romanian and Bulgarian students were not entitled to receive fees and maintenance support from the UK government any more. Interestingly, *The Guardian* notes, “The move coincided with increasingly hostile rhetoric about the anticipated influx of ‘beggars and benefits cheats’ from the two countries when working restrictions to Britain were lifted on 1 January (2014)”.
- The next story run by the paper (4.2) deals with international students celebrating cultural festivals in the UK through the testimony of a Vietnamese student celebrating the Lunar New Year in England. The student writes: “This was my first Tet (Lunar New Year) away from home, and it passed with a coldness – not only because of the weather, but rising up from inside, from my soul and my heart. Tet this year was the feeling of trying not to burst into

tears when talking to my parents on video chat, it was the struggle not to say ‘I’m sad, I miss Vietnam’ when seeing my friends from home getting excited about Tet, and it was hiding my homesickness in front of British friends and my homestay family”.

- Around 10 days later the newspaper published a piece by someone “working in a British university” who described the “folly of the British government’s policy towards foreign students”. His words were harsh towards the government: “Stupid. Incoherent. Short-sighted. Cack-handed. Intrusive. Counter-productive”. The author criticises as such the amalgam between ‘international students’ and ‘immigrants’ that emerged from PM Cameron’s 2010 promise to reduce net migration.
- In the next article (28.2) the Pro vice-chancellor and provost of the University of Nottingham, Malaysia Campus explains that overseas campuses – like her institution – provides new opportunities for staff and students and that their offering has to be strong.
- The 19.3 article examines the ‘trendy’ issue of Massive Open Online Courses (Moocs) in the Global South. The author notes the failure of most such initiatives in the South as they tend not to be adapted to local needs and wishes.
- On 2.4 the newspaper published a piece informing its readers that British universities had as many Chinese postgraduate students as British students.
- Two days later, an article published by the co-editor of *The Global Student Experience: An International and Comparative Analysis* (2013, Routledge), C. Kandiko shares her worries about the drop in foreign student numbers in the UK, confirming for instance that 2013 witnessed a drop of 50% in the number of postgraduate students from India and Pakistan. Her explanations are the followings: foreign students don’t feel welcome in Britain; UK universities appear to be too complacent; talk of negative experiences in the UK spreads fast especially in relation to racism, safety, transition into employment, etc.
- A very similar article was also published on 20.5, entitled *Is the UK still the destination of choice for international students? International student numbers are dropping. Has the UK lost its touch when it comes to recruiting overseas students?*
- Finally, in June 2014 one article dealt with strategies to beat homesickness (testimony) while another one touched upon the burning issue of student couples separated by immigration laws in the UK.

What do these articles tell us about current societal discourses on internationalisation, as presented by a British newspaper? Many of the themes are ‘classics’: adaptation to life in a foreign country, questions of identity and culture but also,

and especially, financial aspects such as discussions on fees, policies, and education export through setting up overseas campuses and proposing ‘free’ online courses through Moocs. In the first two quarters of 2014 the issue of international students being caught up in the UK government’s efforts to toughen possibilities to migrate to the UK is very much talked about. International students used to be considered as ‘privileged’ migrants – though of course not all of them, depending on their nationalities and ‘origins’. Today, being in the UK or other parts of the world, one tends to discuss them as part of the general discourses on immigration. The author of the 17.2 article suggests: “So the student question must be addressed on its own merits, not thrown into a demagogic hotpot marked ‘immigration’ (aka ‘bloody foreigners’)”. In the articles that are critical of how the government treat international students, it is clear that a (new?) feeling of social injustice can be sensed in how the journalists and scholars who wrote the pieces discussed these issues. Social justice is an increasingly important topic in academic mobility and migration, as is evident in the chapters of this volume.

Researchers’ interests

What follows is necessarily selective and subjective. We skimmed through the hundreds of publications from the last four years (2011–2013) on internationalisation and compared what we found with the main pieces of news from *the Guardian*, but also with the topics covered in this volume. The following themes appear to be common: choosing a destination abroad, financial aspects of study abroad, internationalisation at home, interculturality and justice.

We start with the question of choosing a university abroad. In her article, Jane Hemsley-Brown (2012) examines international students’ reasons for choosing an English university based on their applications to study in the UK. The author questions the often-used saying that “the UK has the best education in the world”. *Is it a reality, repetition or cliché?* She asks. Going back to one of the articles from *the Guardian* (2.4.2014), a Chinese student asserts that this is true and that “The tutors really take lectures seriously. Before they give a lecture to students they prepare lots of things, compared with the tutors in China. Lots of tutors in China maybe focus their attention on their own research, and they don’t care much about the students. Here the tutors pay a lot of attention to what we can learn. It’s better than China.” What Hemsley-Brown finds is that students as ‘consumers’ use the same shared language of excellence, quality and choice as universities – even though it may not correspond to the reality. The monetary and symbolic values of certain countries and institutions are discussed in this volume too (see e.g. Van Mol).

Two interesting research articles look into barriers to student mobility, social injustice and inequalities (see Ballatore, Deleva and Kaur in this volume) – themes that must be more researched. The first one by Souto-Otero, Huisman, Beerkens, de Wit & Vuijic (2013) concentrates on the ERASMUS programme. Like the articles from *the Guardian*, financial barriers seem to have a big impact while migration laws do not concern the majority of ERASMUS students – some are from outside the EU so they might face visa issues. The authors propose, on top of more financial support, better information and communication about the programme and stressing the potential benefits of ERASMUS. In *Geographies of educational mobilities: Exploring the uneven flows of international students*, R. Perkins and E. Neumayer (2013) start by confirming that the sources and destinations of academic and student mobility/migration are highly uneven. Their study shows that income in destination countries, relational ties, common language and pre-existing migrant stocks seem to matter much more than the importance of countries' university quality in mobility offering. The authors urge researchers to examine and thus 'complexify' differences between different sub-groupings of developing countries instead of the classical dichotomy of developed/developing countries.

Another topic that intersects with *the Guardian* articles is related to research on overseas campuses and digital technologies. First let us mention an important journal issue called *Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe*, co-edited by N. Glick Schiller and N. B. Salazar (2012), which promotes analyses of the interrelationship between mobility and stasis – instead of separating them as has often been the case in research on academic and student mobility/migration. The notions and concepts of *methodological nationalism*, *native vs. foreigner* thus need to be revised according to the two scholars. Mobility and immobility, localisation and transnational connection, experiences and imaginaries of migration and rootedness and cosmopolitan openness are used to substitute these faulty elements. Internationalisation at home – or 'immobile transnationalism' (Waters & Leung, 2013) – is becoming a core part of the internationalisation discourse. How seriously is it taken? In *Immobile transnationalisms? Young people and their in situ experiences of 'international' education in Hong Kong*, Waters and Leung (2013) examine British degree programmes taught entirely in Hong Kong and their implications in terms of the accumulation of cultural capital for Hong Kong youth. In a similar vein, Jae-Eun Jon (2013) looks into the 'international education' of Korean students when interacting with international students at their home universities. The study shows that programs involving both categories of students led to positive and indirect effect on the home students' intercultural

competence – though, of course, the definition of the latter appears to be a bit too loose. *Internationalisation at home* is a burning issue – especially in times of repeated economic crisis. Again this is discussed in many chapters in this volume (see Normand-Marconnet).

The issue of multiculturalism, in its wider sense covering ethnicity but also social class, disability, gender, etc., has also been dealt with in many publications – while they have not been touched upon in the news. The first publication is a monograph published by A. Soorenian (2013) about disabled international students in British Higher Education. There are many so-called ‘minority’ im/mobile populations that still deserve looking into and intersecting: religious groups, LGBT representatives, multi-movers, etc. Stuart Tannock (2013) offers an interesting study on the admission of ‘wealthy students’ and restricting student visas. Tannock calls for equality to apply to both domestic and international when it comes to recruitment. A taboo study which would need replicating in many parts of the world. Another taboo, which was not discussed in *the Guardian* in the period under scrutiny - and which deserves studying and discussing - is racism and the study abroad experience. In their article, L. Brown and I. Jones (2011) report on racism and religious incidents experiences by international students at a university in the south of England. According to the authors, a third of the students under scrutiny had experienced either verbal or physical abuse. Confirming an argument found in one of *the Guardian* articles, some students explained that they were unwilling to return to the UK after their studies and that their word-of-mouth recommendations to future students would be negative. Three chapters in this volume deal with the important issue of interculturality in study abroad (Härkönen & Dervin, Normand-Marconnet, Ain Nadzimah Abdullah, Chan & Suraya Amiruddin).

About the volume

This volume derives from an international conference that took place in Malaysia in 2012. This bilingual conference (English and French) represented a first attempt at shifting the knowledge created around academic mobility and migration from the ‘Centre’ (i.e. the ‘West’) to the ‘Periphery’ and to propose to examine the new politics of global academic mobility and migration. Many exciting things are happening outside Europe and North America and we felt that it was important to have scholars and practitioners share their research and ideas in a new ‘peripheral’ place. Malaysia is a new EduHub (Welch, 2011; Machart & Dervin, 2014b) which joined the M.I.T. (i.e. Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand) initiative. This programme intends to develop academic mobility

between these three countries at first and is largely referring to the Erasmus programme in its principle. It appears necessary to have researchers from the (former?) 'Centre' to the 'Periphery' to exchange ideas on the motivations, successes and the pitfalls of the programmes. The volume reflects the rich discussions and debates that took place at the conference. The seven chapters include both studies in Europe and in the Asia-Pacific. There are many similarities in the experiences described in the chapters regardless of the context of the studies. Academic mobility and migration has become *glocal* and the authors add testimony to this significant development.

In the first chapter, **Christof Van Mol** analyses the determinants which encourage/refrain students from three Italian universities to take part in academic mobility. In this context, a sojourn abroad is perceived by the participants as an advantage for the job market and future employability but its realisation depends on economic, cultural and social factors. The narratives of returnees and the impact of families play an important role in the students' motivation as the former influences the participants' choices and the latter are the major financial contributors who make it possible for students to study abroad. The family's prior international experience appears also as a key determinant, which generates a reproduction of discrimination.

In the next chapter, **Magali Ballatore** compares data from a British, a French and an Italian university and shows that mobility is a reproductive phenomenon. Despite the political discourses and official financial supports, only a minority of students can effectively fund their sojourn abroad. They live in a "comfortable and conformist Erasmus "bubble" and there is a real need to evaluate how European programmes like Erasmus and Socrates eventually contribute to real social change and to social justice.

In her chapter, **Zhivka Deleva** deals with the recognition of certifications delivered by a foreign institution in the Slovakian Republic. If the European Union facilitates the mobility of professionals within its borders, it appears that the validation of foreign degrees at the national level (and thus the possibility for individuals to practise the skills they were trained for) is left to the sole appreciation of individual administrative decision makers. One particular qualification delivered by the same university to two different persons can thus be recognised or not, which may reduce the idealistic discourses claiming that mobility adds to the value of the CVs to naught.

Analysing the results of the *Changing Academic Profession Study*, **Sarjit Kaur** compares the results obtained for Malaysia to selected countries. Lecturers in Malaysian universities have often been trained abroad especially at graduate and postgraduate levels, but they appear to be less mobile than their counterparts in

other developed countries as most of them will conclude their career in the same institution where they started it. While internationalisation “constitutes a major portion of academic career goals”, Kaur claims, relatively few Malaysian lecturers seek for a position overseas or in another institution.

The next section relates to intercultural aspects of academic mobility and migration. **Anu Härkönen** and **Fred Dervin**'s chapter analyses the motivations that students applying for a mobility programme expressed in their motivation letters and how this was perceived by international officers/members of staff in charge of mobility programmes in Finnish higher education. The students tended to reproduce a hegemonic discourse demonstrating the potential benefits of a sojourn abroad for their personal development/achievement and their future employability or professional network. They were willing to demonstrate that a sojourn abroad *is* an advantage in terms of individual improvement (although this idea needs to be questioned) and that it would help them in their career (although research tends to show the contrary). Interestingly, the feedback from the staff in charge shows that there are no clear criteria as to how to select participants and that personal factors can influence the selection process.

In a similar vein, **Nadine Normand-Marconnet** addresses the intercultural competence of students who participated in an exchange programme between three campuses of the same university located in Australia, Malaysia and South Africa. Her results show remarkable similarities despite the diversity of socio-demographic and academic backgrounds. Most respondents value personal development and intercultural experience (IC) more than professional gains. However, their discourse on IC as well as the administrator's reproduce the promotional rhetoric and appears to be quite fuzzy: nobody seems to know exactly what to expect from a sojourn abroad. The researcher considers that a pre-departure module should be implemented in order to develop intercultural skills and support exchange students during their time abroad.

In the last chapter of this volume, **Ain Nadzimah Abdullah**, **Swee Heng Chan** and **Suraya Amirrudin** analyse the difficulties faced by Chinese nationals who study at a private university in Malaysia. The students have to write a project in English, which is often the medium of instruction in Malaysia when international students take the course, but international students who don't come from an English-speaking environment often lack proficiency. They need to take English classes to improve their language skills and find support. The researchers claim that their difficulties go beyond their linguistic skills and that their previous learning experience and their representation of what is expected from them seem to impact on their academic achievement.

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