

# **International Student Mobility within Europe: Responding to National, Regional and Global Challenges**

## **Event report**

### **1. Event themes**

The workshop's focus was on current challenges to international student mobility (ISM) within Europe, and structured around three main themes – political challenges, health and environmental challenges, and socio-economic challenges. These various challenges were addressed by the two keynote speakers, the presenters in the three paper sessions, and those who took part in the policy and practice panel at the end of the event. Below we highlight some of the key points made during the presentations and discussion.

#### Theme 1. Political challenges

*European mobility as a (quasi-) public good.* The benefits of international student mobility have been primarily conceptualised at the individual level. However, Shields<sup>i</sup> suggested that this perspective obscures positive spillovers across local, national and global scales. For instance, the movement of students in Europe facilitated by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Erasmus+ programme has promoted reciprocal exchanges, climate action and wider public benefits, which go beyond individual advantages. Notwithstanding, public and private benefits accruing through international mobility may vary by the length of the study-abroad period (e.g., credit/degree mobility), the level of study (e.g., Master's/PhD) and the individual characteristics of students.

*Brexit and EU students.* Brexit has posed immense challenges to UK higher education. According to an ESRC-funded study which explores the perceived implications of Brexit for HEIs in the four UK nations, the primary concern raised by institutional leaders and senior academics is EU student numbers, with a 40 per cent drop in the January 2021 applications (Papatsiba and Hetherington<sup>ii</sup>). Other issues include threats to cultural diversity, increased intra-national competition between UK universities, as well as heightened competition with institutions globally. It is suggested that a fall in the diversity of the student body may impact academic quality and undermine the international reputation of UK universities - leading to the sector becoming more insular and inward-looking. Lower-ranked, less prestigious universities are also found to be hit hardest by the compound impacts of Brexit alongside pre-existing issues within the hierarchical sector.

*Geopolitics, Erasmus+ and institutional networks.* Erasmus+ programmes have been central to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) through promoting student mobility between European countries. However, uneven mobility patterns between countries are a major impediment to a unified higher education area within Europe. Network analysis of Erasmus+ student mobility data from 2019 reveals that countries tend to establish mobility agreements with those nations which send or receive similar numbers of students to themselves (Bulut Sahin, Söylemez and Sahin<sup>iii</sup>). This reinforces a centre/periphery divide between sub-regions

within Europe, which reflects the broader geopolitical positions and pragmatic preferences of individual countries involved in the Erasmus+ programme.

*Politics of international doctoral students' writing practices.* Internationalisation has been a key policy focus of higher education within and beyond Europe. The incorporation of intercultural and international dimensions into teaching and learning is seen as integral to this process. According to research funded by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), the academic writing experience of international doctoral students in two UK HEIs is nevertheless fragmented by power relations embedded in unequal supervisory relationships and colonial histories (Hinton-Smith, Danvers, Mazanderani and Webb<sup>iv</sup>). The 'othering' of international students and their ways of knowing poses a significant challenge to a sense of belonging and experiences during their studies in the UK.

## Theme 2. Health and environmental challenges

*Crisis communication and international students.* Covid-19 has brought to the fore the importance of crisis communication to the public. Despite the emphasis placed by national governments on recruiting and retaining international students, in terms of national crisis communication strategy, students have not been equally positioned. This is borne out by a study which demonstrates information gaps and divergent channels in communicating pandemic measures between domestic and international students in Finland (Jokilla and Mathies<sup>v</sup>). Such gaps were exacerbated by the language used in official communications (Finnish/Swedish and only limited English) and the means of communication (relying on only official sources). As such the communication was predominantly left to the HEIs to take the responsibility for distributing information to international students.

*Safety, security, and Chinese and East Asian students in the UK.* The latest outbreak of coronavirus has led to renewed concern about the safety and security of international students. As the virus was initially described in racist terms, Chinese and East Asian students have been particularly affected by such framings and subject to discrimination. Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of racial discrimination, recent research on Chinese (and Chinese presenting) international students in the UK indicates a low level of reporting of hate crimes to universities and local police forces amongst these students (Lim, Li, Yu, Levy, Wang, Li and Ban<sup>vi</sup>). This has important implications for international students, HEIs and wider society, as this affects international students' experience and well-being while in the UK as well as the recruitment of these students in the long term.

*Covid-19 and prospective Chinese masters' students.* Covid-19 has also impacted students' ability to travel. Many current students have been stuck in limbo (either in their home country or the country in which they are studying), while numerous prospective students have suspended or delayed their plans to study abroad. A study of prospective Chinese masters' students who have deferred their studies in the UK highlights some of these concerns (Yu, He and Cao<sup>vii</sup>). It is reported that tensions often arise between students and their parents, as there is no tradition/culture of having a gap year in China and hence little understanding from parents. This is heightened by the lack of frequent and updated information from universities in the UK.

### Theme 3: Socio-economic challenges

*International student mobility as a tool for societal change.* Just as recent ecological and socio-political changes have had an effect on the movement of international students, so too international student mobility can be used to tackle various challenges at the macro level. A study drawing on Eurograduate survey pilot data has lent support to this claim by demonstrating the positive correlations between study abroad and self-reported levels of skills, happiness and democratic attitudes (e.g., trust and political participation) (Mihut<sup>viii</sup>). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there are important differences across various groups of students, with migrant graduates (i.e. graduates with a migrant background – not necessarily those who have moved abroad for study) indicating lower levels of skills and trust than their domestic and international counterparts.

*Democratisation of international mobility through scholarships.* Scholarships have played a major role in enabling the mobility of international students. However, previous studies suggest that these scholarships usually cater to students from more privileged backgrounds and thereby reproduce their social advantage across national borders. Mixed-methods research that examines the experiences of Mexican doctoral scholarship recipients provides a more complex picture (Lopez-Murillo<sup>ix</sup>). The study finds that about a third of the respondents came from lower socio-economic backgrounds. It also demonstrates that international mobility experiences provide these students with the opportunities to enhance their capabilities and freedom as well as bring wider social benefits.

*Social selectivity in internationalisation activities at home.* Due to the socially selective nature of international student mobility, the benefits of internationalisation of higher education have thus far been mainly limited to those from higher socio-economic backgrounds. In order to address this, higher education institutions around the world have increasingly focused on various internationalisation activities at home. According to a recent research on students studying at three HEIs in Belgium and the Netherlands, participation in internationalisation activities is nonetheless characterised by social selectivity (Van Mol and Perez-Encinas<sup>x</sup>). Students from low socio-economic backgrounds, for instance, are less likely to participate in such activities compared to students from higher socio-economic backgrounds. As such, it seems that internationalisation at home activities do not always reach more diverse groups compared to study abroad programmes, whereas this very often is the aim of these activities.

*Growing diversification and stratification.* As participation in international student mobility has widened, the social profiles of mobile students have become diversified. Brooks<sup>xi</sup> indicates that this can be attributed to the supply and demand of international education. Supply-side factors include education and migration policies in sending countries as well as the recruitment strategies of individual universities and education agents. Decisions made by individual families and students also contribute to the diversification of international student body. Importantly, this has resulted in the stratification of experience and outcomes of those undertaking credit or degree mobility, with those from more privileged backgrounds likely accessing ‘top-tier’ institutions and/or programmes.

## 2. Next steps - Outcomes

There are three main outcomes from the event. First, we have produced a series of recordings of the talks (see links below), which we will disseminate widely using social media and the mailing list of workshop attendees.

[Zoom Link for Day One](#): Passcode: pb&v4Cc@

[Zoom Link for Day Two](#): Passcode: 10ONRj\*Z

We hope that this will constitute a useful resource for researchers in ISM, and particularly those who were not able to attend the event itself. Second, we have put together a [policy brief](#). This identifies key messages for policy and practice from each of the talks, and presents a series of recommendations for policymakers and higher education institutions. This will be available on the workshop website, advertised on social media and also emailed to various key stakeholders. Finally, we are putting together a special issue of papers from the workshop. We have had interest from the *British Educational Research Journal* (a key journal in the field, with a high impact factor and large readership), and are currently putting together a proposal to be submitted in September. This will be guest-edited by small group of the workshop organisers, including one early career researcher and one scholar outside the UK (Brooks, Courtois, Faas and Jayadeva).

## 3. Acknowledgements

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<sup>i</sup> Robin Shields, University of Bristol, UK. *European Mobility as a Public Good for Sustainable Societies*.

<sup>ii</sup> Vassiliki Papatsiba and Alex Hetherington, University of Sheffield, UK. *Institutional representations of European students in UK higher education in response to Brexit*.

<sup>iii</sup> Betül Bulut Şahin, Emrah Söylemez and Şavas Zafer Şahin, Middle East Technical University, Turkey. *A Network Analysis of the Geopolitical Structure of Erasmus+ Student Mobility in European Higher Education Area*.

<sup>iv</sup> Tamsin Hinton-Smith, Emily Danvers, Fawzia Haeri Mazanderani and Rebecca Webb, University of Sussex, UK. *International Doctoral Students' Writing Practices: Mobility, transitions and translations across writing and knowing*.

<sup>v</sup> Suvi Jokila, University of Turku, Finland and Charles Mathies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. *Silence during a pandemic: how crisis communication constructs international students' position in Finland*.

<sup>vi</sup> Miguel Lim, Hanwei Li, Jingran Yu, Katja Levy, Ammeline Wang, Boya Li and Xueting Ban, University of Manchester, UK. *COVID and Chinese and East Asian University Students in the UK: Safety, Security, and Communication*.

<sup>vii</sup> Yun Yu, Rui He and Xuemeng Cao, Shanghai Normal University, China. *The "Chosen" UK? Re-imagination of International Education Mobility for Prospective Chinese Master Students during the Covid-19 Pandemic*

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<sup>viii</sup> Georgiana Mihut, University of Warwick, UK. *Skills, happiness, and democratic attitudes among international, migrant, and domestic graduates. A socio-economic analysis of risk and protective factors using Eurograduate pilot data.*

<sup>ix</sup> Karla Lopez-Murillo, UCL, UK. *Diverse socio-economic backgrounds and international pathways. Mobility opportunities through a scholarship programme for Mexican doctoral students.*

<sup>x</sup> Christof Van Mol and Adriana Perez-Encinas, Tilburg University, The Netherlands; Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain. *Going beyond mobility: do different (social) groups of students need different internationalisation activities?*

<sup>xi</sup> Rachel Brooks, University of Surrey, UK. *International student mobilities. Socio-economic diversification and implications for higher education staff.*