Is international education ethical and political enough? Rethinking the ethics and politics of international student mobility

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Ideas about mobility consistently risk becoming locked into ahistorical and depoliticized tropes that presume flattened geographies, opportunities without borders, and autonomous, raceless/genderless mobile subjects.

(Stein and Andreotti, 2017, p. 135)

Structure of this presentation

- The ethics and politics of international education
- Conceptual framework: institutional habitus
- The study
- Findings
- Conclusion
- Implications for practice and research

Ethics and politics of ISM: An overview

- **Ethics** is concerned with relationality (and/or the denial of relationality), while **politics** broadly refers to issues involving power or domination (Stein, 2016).

- These two notions are **closely intertwined**: 'ethics are formulated, situated and negotiated within and between particular socio-historical contexts, collectivities, subejctivities, and power relations' (ibid., p. 7)

- Discussions about the ethics and politics of international education (and international student mobility in particular) are underpinned by two broader perspectives: **neoliberalism** and **postcolonialism** (Waters, 2018; Yang, 2019)
  - The **neoliberal** positioning of higher education as a profit-driven industry and of international students as a source of profit (e.g., international enrolment as a means to subsidize local students' education and other costs, widening inequality in international students' home countries)
  - Western HEIs' current dominance of educational internationalization and ISM, realized through **colonialism** (e.g., the uneven flow of international students – from 'rest' to West, teaching/learning approaches for international students who are constructed as 'subjects of deficit' and are therefore responsible to adapt)

Ethics and politics of ISM: An overview

- Ethical and political questions have been asked with respect to **the relationships between key actors involved in international education** (and international student mobility in particular) (Yang, 2018; Jayadeva, 2019; Waters & Leung, 2013a, 2013b)

  o These key actors may include: mobile students, educational intermediaries (e.g., agents/brokers), education providers, sending/receiving country communities, sending/receiving country policy makers/regulators, international/global governance bodies or mechanisms

- Nevertheless, consideration of the ethical and political dimensions of international education so far **remains implicit and relatively underexplored from an institutional perspective.**

Ethics and politics of ISM: UK context

- Despite tuition fee reforms, other sources of revenue have been deemed necessary for complimenting reduced public funding. **International education, and particularly the direct recruitment of international students, serves as 'a means of financing the government's objective of opening higher education to a larger proportion of the UK population without increasing taxes'** (Findlay, 2011, p. 178).

- **In a job market that is increasingly globalised and where workers are increasingly mobile, having a degree from a reputable university in the UK can significantly improve a student's career prospects,** particularly in Asia, where a big chunk of international students come from. This explains, in part, why international students are willing to pay [significantly more] for a UK degree (Katsomitros, 2013, p. 1).

Ethics and politics of ISM: UK context

- **It [the UK degree]'s recognised everywhere**. Everybody knows that. If you want to be qualified, you go through [the] UK system. People, actually, take you seriously. If you go to [the] US, it won't be the same. If you compare it [the USA] with the UK, it's just different – there's just some seriousness in the UK education, yeah. (Nichole, Kenya, Brookes)

- **I just feel like I could just get a job anywhere**. If you got a degree from the UK, that means a lot, especially in the Commonwealth, yeah. I think it's [being] looked at, pretty, positively. (Emma, New Zealand, Brookes)

- **I think everywhere through[out] the world? I don't think it's geographically limited.** The degree [from the UK] is quite, uh, universally accepted, I suppose' (Aaron, India, Oxford)

Conceptual framework

- This study draws on **the notion of institutional habitus** which expands a collective understanding of Bourdieu's concept of habitus to an institution.

- Introduced by McDonough (1997), institutional habitus refers to the "impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behavior, through an intermediate organization" (p. 107)

- As informed by Reay et al.'s (2001; 2005) research, institutional habitus is operationalized in this study in the following:
  - **Educational status** (i.e., the university's position in university rankings)
  - **Organisational practices** (i.e., the quality and quantity of careers support)
  - **Cultural and expressive characteristics** (i.e., the class and race of people and the place of institutions).

The study

- Research methods: case studies & qualitative semi-structured interviews

- Research sites: three universities in England
  - University of Oxford, an 'elite' university; University College London, a pre-1992 university; Oxford Brookes University, a post-1992 university

- Participants:
  - 55 non-EU international students who were enro[lled] degrees
  - Three career staff

- Fieldwork: took place in Oxford and London be[...]

Participant statistics

	Gender	Enrolled degree	Study/graduation status	Subject of study	Nationality
Oxford (20)	Female (11) Male (9)	PhDs (9) Masters (11)	Graduates (12) Students (8)	Social Sciences (13) STEM (7)	China (7) India (7) Other (6)
UCL (18)	Female (11) Male (7)	PhDs (10) Masters (8)	Graduates (6) Students (12)	Social Sciences (7) STEM (11)	China (8) India (1) Other (9)
Brookes (17)	Female (9) Male (8)	PhDs (4) Masters (13)	Graduates (6) Students (11)	Social Sciences (11) STEM (6)	China (2) India (1) Other (9)
Total (55)	Female (31) Male (24)	PhDs (23) Masters (32)	Graduates (24) Students (31)	Social Sciences (33) STEM (22)	China (17) India (9) Other (29)

Top ten non-EU sending countries
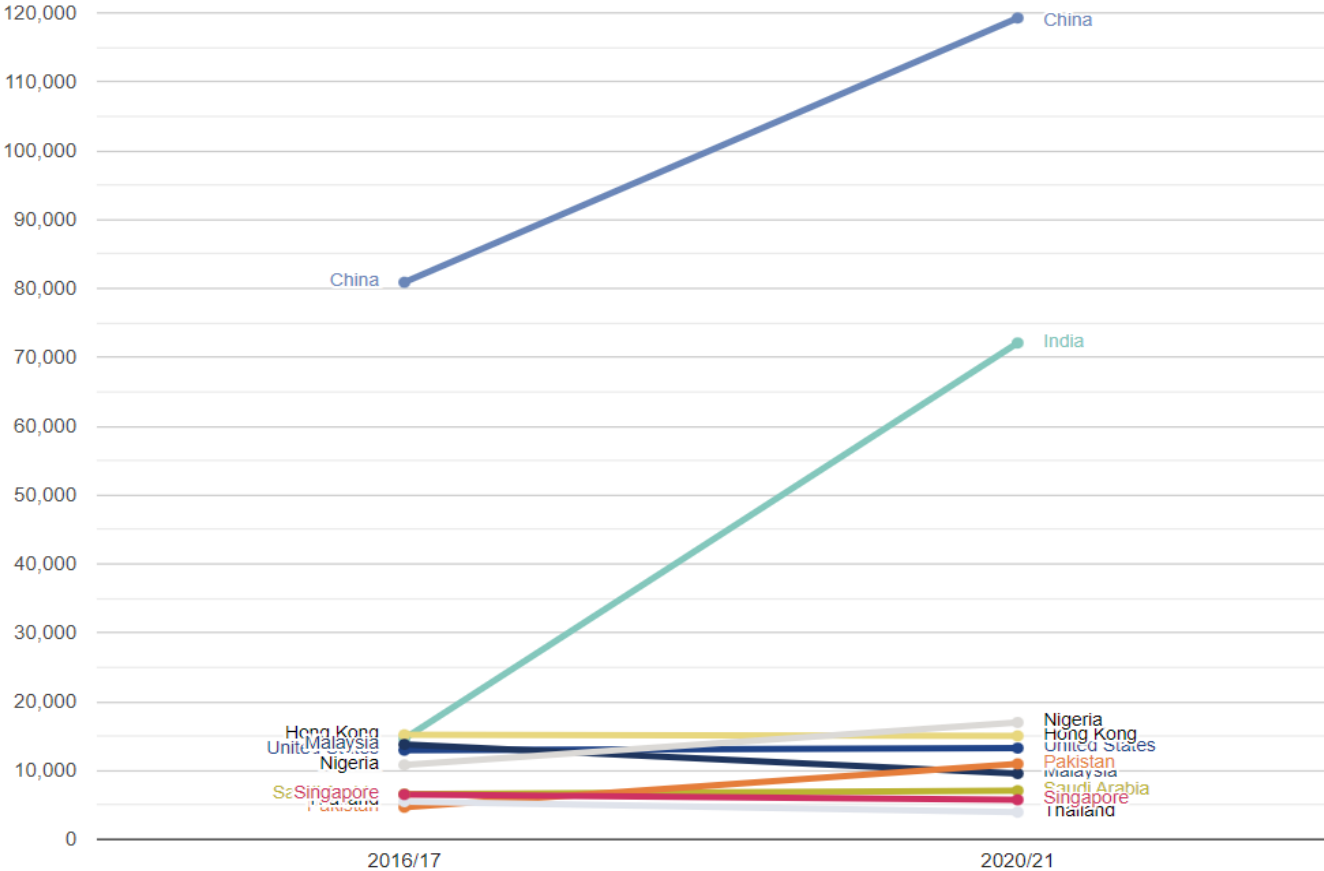
Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency student enrolment data, 2016/17

Institutional habitus

The role of place - individual higher education institutions

Institutional habitus

- I don't think it's a complaint. I love Oxford University but the tone it's **a bit too white**. I know there are a lot of Asian students, so I don't feel, um, [isolated] most of [the] time. But if it's so white, and if there's no black, as an Asian, [I feel] it's not right because we are still the minority [in the university]. (Daisy, China, Oxford)

- **So things like, um, so eating dinner in a formal hall – you'd be dressed up and you wear these weird gowns, you know, and it will be a candlelit dinner. […] And during the matriculation**, you start in your college, and then you walk with your college mates to the Sheldonian theatre, and you enter. And, um, **the chancellor or vice chancellor speaks in Latin at you.** […] All you are aware is your becoming a student at the University of Oxford. […] **They've been doing this matriculation ceremony for, like, I don't know, 1,000 years. It's like those little things [that] have gone through the generations.** (Edward, Canada, Oxford)

Institutional habitus

- I just like the feeling that, you know, **different streets [in London] are different parts of UCL**. (Naomi, Singapore, UCL)

- **The course was accredited**. It [the professional accreditation] was one of the things that they [the university] advertised the most, I think. (Emma, New Zealand, Brookes)

The influence of institutional habitus

On international students' experiences during and after their studies

The influence of institutional habitus

- Oxford was, like, one life. Your study, your social activities, your friends are all in **one bubble** . . . beautiful bubble'. (Daisy, China, Oxford)

- **I've been surrounded by, uh, people that study in Oxford University**, you know? When [if] you socialize with their people, it will encourage you to think, um, similar with them. (Sabrina, Indonesia, Brookes)

- In Hong Kong, we have the fixed classrooms for a semester for the courses. But, here **[at UCL], every week [we change the venue] for the new lecture.** It is becom[ing] an adventurous game! To join an adventurous game and find my classroom. Sometime[s], we have the lesson in mathematic buildings. Sometimes, in Russell Square. Sometime, in Warren Street. Sometimes, like, in [the] main campus. [. . .] I think that is one of the thing[s] that I didn't get used to it. (Ellen, Hong Kong, UCL)

The influence of institutional habitus

- They [the university] do give you a platform of attending different career fairs. **So every term, at least three or four fairs happened**, and then different companies come and give their presentations. So [there are] a lot of, uh, different companies, and [you can] see which one fits your profile. [...] **Because it's Oxford, a lot of companies prefer to come and, uh, present there [career fairs at Oxford]. So yeah, it gives you a larger pool to choose from.** (Aaron, India, Oxford)

- Um, I feel like I'm part of history. So I live not far from here. And on my way to school, I get to see like a place where [Charles] Darwin used to live. Um, **I get to see all sorts of history, as I'm walking by. I get to see where Virginia Woolf [statue is situated]. I get to see, um, all these amazing, like, trendsetter[s]... people who've, like, changed how the world thinks. And that's why I'm here.** That's a huge reason why I'm here. [It] is for that networking to be part of that [the reason]. That culture to be part of, um, [the reason]. [...] **[It is to become] somebody that makes a difference in the world.** (Thomas, Canada, UCL)

- I think, that's where it [Oxford Brookes University] stood out from all of that [other institutions]. **Because, basically, [attending] the university is not generally... it may not be an advantage [and] all of that. But, um, okay, let me give you an instance now. When I return, if I go back to my country and I go with an Oxford Brookes certificate, except someone who knows the school [Oxford Brookes University] very well, I [will] just say I [am from] Oxford [laughs].** (George, Nigeria, Brookes)

The price or the promise?

The interplay of individual and institutional habitus

The price or the promise?

- I think, uh, it's quite **elitist**? It's very **elitist.** Because there's a lot of traditions. There's a lot of things happening. It's fun. It's very quaint. It's very interesting. But it can also be very excluding to somebody who is not [part of the upper or middle-class], yeah. Also [there are] **not as many coloured people**… things like that. (Jasmin, India, Oxford)

- **90 per cent of students in my programme is from mainland China. I think that is not really what I really think [expected] before I got here.** I thought I can have a lot of foreign, uh, classmate and improve my English. But, um, after [all], I just improved my Mandarin [laughs]. […] **If you choose the course with a lot of Hong Kong people or a lot of Chinese people, then why [did] I come to UK to study?** (Ellen, Hong Kong, UCL)

- **The majority of the class was actually international students, which was nice.** We learned from each other's experiences and this gave us more exposure to global experiences. I think it [the international experiences gained from the interaction with other students] will allow me to work anywhere I want to really. (Katie, Canada, UCL)

The price or the promise?

- It [the university] has **some of [the] best professors in the field and the best opportunities in the industry.** [...] **And this degree is, uh, accepted and valued all over the world.** There is not a limitation. [...] I think as far as the degree concerns, I will have, uh, opportunities in the UK and Europe, US, China, uh, India... everywhere, I think. (Sana, India, Oxford)

- I think I was ready to come back home. Um, because when I was there, I was 28 years old. So I was older than a few people on the programme. [...] My mum is retired now. So she doesn't take an income like she used to. I think [I have] **some financial responsibility** [for my mum]. So it seems, you know, kind of right to go back home (Alice, USA, Brookes)

Main contributions

- I demonstrate **the ethical and political limitations, as well as possibilities, of ISM** through a focus on the relationship between higher education institutions and their international students.

- **The notion of institutional habitus** enables a detailed examination of the institutional contexts which influence international students' experiences during and after their studies, whilst drawing attention to differences between these students within each institution.

- Overall, the awareness of the politics of ISM at the institutional level **helps to 'de-naturalise'** the construction of international students and their experiences in the UK **and brings to the fore** the socially and spatially differentiated flow of international students in and through UK higher education.

Implications for practice and research

- **First, policy makers** should be more sensitized to the link between higher education institutions and their international students in terms of its implications for educational equity.

- **Other HE stakeholders** need to facilitate discussions of inclusivity and social differences amongst international students and help universities to provide relevant resources catered to their needs (e.g., financial hardship funds during Covid-19).

- **Higher education institutions** also need to ensure that the gap between international students' expectations and their experiences overseas is minimized.

- **Future research** should pay more attention to the social experiences and relationships between key actors involved in ISM. Measuring them against ethical principles will have implications for the sustainability of international education (which should go beyond the matters of numbers).

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If you are interested in learning more about my research…

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Thanks! ☺
Any questions?

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