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# Classifications and clarifications: rethinking international student mobility and the voluntariness of migration

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**ABSTRACT**

Linking insights from the fields of international education and migration/mobilities studies – in particular, those offered by Streitwieser [(2019). 'International Education for Enlightenment, for Opportunity and for Survival: Where Students, Migrants and Refugees Diverge'. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education* 11: 4–9] and Bivand Erdal and Oeppen [(2018). 'Forced to Leave? The Discursive and Analytical Significance of Describing Migration as Forced and Voluntary'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44 (6): 981–998] – we introduce a new approach to analysing international student mobility (ISM) as higher education, migration, and mobility intertwine in increasingly complex ways. First, we attend to the messiness of ISM's terms, data, and practices, offering clarifications of some commonly-used terms and considerations for stakeholders. We then present our updated conceptual lens which positions ISM as a landscape structured by the interface of two continuums: (1) the discretion to move, and (2) opportunity. By better reflecting the spectrum of ISM's voluntariness and its impact on opportunity, we highlight the ongoing reproduction, amplification, dissolvement, and restructuring of privilege within international education. Our approach also visibilises students from displaced, refugee, and forced-migrant backgrounds. Ultimately, we problematise the loose subfield of ISM and stress the need for increased interdisciplinary engagement.

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## Introduction

Internationally mobile students are still often discussed as a relatively homogenous group with common motivations and experiences. However, insights from both international education and migration/mobilities studies challenge this prevailing notion, demanding a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between higher education (HE), migration, and mobility. Drawing from each field, we suggest a new approach to analysing international student mobility (ISM) which highlights its complexities, particularly regarding the voluntariness of international migration and the (often overlooked) participation of students from displaced, refugee, and forced-migrant backgrounds. Our hope is that this expanded typology will encourage more attention to the ways in which migration's reproduction, amplification, dissolvement, and restructuring of forms of privilege (Robertson and Roberts 2022) shape international education today. We also

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aim to inform those analysing and working with internationally mobile populations, including education institutions (e.g. Crist 2023; Unangst 2022) and governments.

While robust ISM literature exists within both international education and migration/mobilities studies, they rarely intersect, particularly regarding forced ISM (Murray 2022). Bridging the two literatures is critical, we argue, because education's role in relation to ISM is shifting. For example, as HE systems become increasingly economically dependent on fee-paying international students – and countries, particularly in the Global North, become dependent on those international students as a source of future economic immigrants (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2022) – HE institutions are increasingly positioned as migration actors within a larger HE-migration *edugration* nexus (Brunner 2022a; 2023b; Cerna and Chou 2023). They are also becoming 'important site[s] for the formation and cultivation of new diasporas' (Rizvi 2023, 16) and pathways to protection for displaced students, the latter being an expanding area of refugee policy under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Global Compact on Refugees (Hakimi 2022; Oeppen and Zaman 2021–2022).

This is not to say the link between ISM and migration is new; HE has for decades facilitated a significant proportion of many Global North countries' so-called high-skilled immigration (She and Wotherspoon 2013), and there are historical instances of HE institutions providing refuge for displaced students and scholars (e.g. Madokoro 2008). Still, most ISM literature 'either fail[s] to differentiate between immigration statuses' or omits considerations of education institutions' roles in migration (Murray 2022, 103). Our paper seeks to fill this gap.

We primarily build upon two key conceptualizations. The first (Streitwieser 2019), from international education, separated ISM into three distinct categories: (1) voluntary international education (e.g. credit mobility, exchange programmes) as 'mobility for enlightenment;' (2) international education driven by economic migration (e.g. degree mobility as an immigration strategy) as 'mobility for opportunity;' and (3) international education undertaken alongside forced migration (i.e. refugee education) as 'mobility for survival' (4). We interpret Streitwieser's categories as fitting together like nesting dolls, with the first (mobility for enlightenment) being a subset of the second (mobility for opportunity), which, in turn, is a subset of the third (mobility for survival). In other words, while enlightenment is an element of all ISM, only a subset involves opportunity as a primary motivating factor; and, within this subset, an even smaller subset is additionally driven by survival. The second (Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 2018), from migration studies, positioned forced and voluntary migration as a spectrum rather than as a dichotomy. Instead of simply acknowledging the existence of this spectrum, Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 'unpack[ed] the experienced, observed and labelled dimensions' of the distinction between forced and voluntary migration (2). Both papers presented important interventions which added necessary complexity to the dominant terms used to describe mobility in their respective fields.

In what follows, we combine insights from each conceptualisation to advocate for a richer interdisciplinary study of ISM. We intentionally exclude discussions of virtual exchange/mobility, or forms of mobility relying on technology to infuse elements of global knowledge and learning into courses of programmes of study. While such mobilities proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic, they intersect with migration in different ways and thus present a different set of drivers, antecedents, and issues. We also omit discussions of academic mobility/migration specific to scholars/academics (Teichler 2015), as well as more comprehensive frameworks, such as intellectual migration (Li et al. 2021) which emphasise integrative approaches to studying ISM and academic mobility/migration. Like Li et al., we see ISM falling on a continuum of migration. However, due to the constraints of a single paper, we limit our focus to international *student* mobility – which we position as an overarching term containing more specific terms, such as international student *migration* – in order to unpack and clarify its specific complexities.

## 'International student mobility': a complex label and history

Migration and mobility have long been intertwined with education (Raghuram 2013). In the context of HE internationalisation, ISM falls within a subset of institutionally-driven activities described as academic mobility, with 'at-home' activities (e.g. infusing the curriculum with international elements) distinguished from those that are cross-border or take place abroad (e.g. the mobility of people and/or programmes) (Knight 2012). Drawing from Philip Altbach, Maldonado-Maldonado (2014) offered the 'classical' definition of ISM as 'the physical deployment that individuals undertake to obtain some kind of academic experience in a higher education institution of another country' (128).

Until recently, ISM has been undertheorized in education, lacking both empirical and conceptual research (Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, and Rhoades 2006; Ogden, Streitwieser, and Van Mol 2020). The study of migration has also been critiqued for overlooking the 'inequalities, discrimination, and power disputes' associated with international student flows (Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, and Rhoades 2006, 580), and discussions initiated by international education practitioners were once denounced for rarely going 'beyond crude economic and political assessments of student motivations' (Brooks and Waters 2011, 114). These critiques spurred research on ISM beyond the framework of internationalisation, including those drawing from migration/mobilities studies.

According to Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002), migration studies developed after WWII as some nation-states exerted more active influence over both (1) migration movements, and (2) the way in which social scientists interpreted them. At that time, scholars tended to describe migrants as potential security risks, culturally 'Others', and socially marginal, mirroring and legitimising 'the project of nation-state building aimed at establishing a sovereign citizenry, a homogenous nation, a community of solidarity and a territorially-bounded state' (311). The field also thought of space as distinctive places linked by push–pull factors, with migration functioning as part of a structural interdependence between places, e.g. in theorising brain drain (Raghuram 2013). However, geographers in particular argued that links between places can be maintained without the assumption of a structural dependency or privileging the scale of the nation-state, allowing migrants increased agency (Raghuram 2013). This recognition in the early 2000s led to a de-emphasis of the nation-state in favour of a transnational turn (Raghuram 2013) which conceived migration as 'the movement of people across territories' contingent on places, relationships, activities, and regulatory regimes (Collins 2008, 398). Discussions of brain drain, for example, moved away from zero-sum assumptions towards notions of brain circulation (Favell, Feldblum, and Smith 2007; Knight 2018).

This focus on transnationalism was part of a larger increase in the study of movement, described by Urry (2007) as a cross/post-disciplinary 'mobility turn'. This new mobilities paradigm highlighted 'the movement involved in migration, rather than privileging the sending and receiving localities and their perspectives' (King and Raghuram 2013, 129) and focused on movement conducted over a relatively shorter time-frame with a high likelihood of return. This contrasted with migration, which referred to a longer-term move where the probability of return to one's country of origin was more open-ended (Dryden-Peterson 2016; King and Raghuram 2013). Mobilities studies soon proliferated, expanding to include conceptualizations of stillness and (usually enforced) stuckness (Cresswell 2012).

Within migration studies, ISM had at one point been a 'neglected field' compared to other forms of migration (King and Raghuram 2013, 127). Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo wrote that ISM research had engaged with the 'vibrant literature on academic mobility' in only a limited way (2014, 685). However, ISM's study increased in the 2010s (Findlay et al. 2012) and has become a key field within migration (Riaño, Van Mol, and Raghuram 2018; Van Mol 2014; Waters 2018) and international education research alike (Gümüş, Gök, and Esen 2020; Yang 2020). Critical insights from the study of migration and mobilities are now recognised as relevant to ISM research; for example, there is a growing acknowledgement that mobility – including ISM – is historically

enabled by colonialism (Kaplan 2015), while Montegary and White (2015) urged an understanding of 'mobility as a violently and unfairly distributed resource' (4). Scholars also position ISM as an ongoing process bound up in fluid, mobile lives rather than a discrete event (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2014). The growing subfield of critical internationalisation studies is also engaging with ISM (Stein 2021).

Despite some debate over the necessity of theorising of ISM as a unique type of migration (Findlay et al. 2012; Li et al. 2021), many agree on its distinct nature, highlighting the significance of, for example, the governance of specific student visa categories and regulatory mechanisms and the fact that knowledge acquisition is a unique migration driver (Johnstone and Lee 2014; Raghuram 2013). Still, theorising ISM remains challenging due to the wide range of experiences of, and motivations for, mobility (King and Raghuram 2013; Reisberg and Rumbley 2014), while distinguishing between categories of internationally mobile people is itself debated (Hamlin 2022; Hamlin et al. 2021; Schweitzer, Humphris, and Monforte 2022). Changing technologies (e.g. virtual mobility), regional integration processes (e.g. a post-European Union context), and partnership structures (e.g. allowing for so-called 'local international education') complicate who is counted as an international student (Beech 2017). In addition, ISM is often undertaken as part of attempted upward, or at least progressive, mobility and thus interrelated with other forms of mobility, such as economic, geographical, vocational, social, and personal (Maldonado-Maldonado 2014), blurring the lines between the start and end of a specifically *international* mobility process. Even ISM's focus on international mobility over *intra*national mobility raises important questions about the distinctiveness of cross-border movement and the privileging of (often colonial) nation-state borders.

ISM's lack of clarity – and therefore lack of connectedness – is also due to misalignments between countries' national HE and migration policies. These variances produce different motivations for ISM and lead to varying patterns of mobility globally, each subject to different immigration policies and pathways (Riaño, Van Mol, and Raghuram 2018). ISM as educational and cultural exchange is supposedly premised on the ideal of reciprocity and the assumption that international students will return to their home country to serve as an informal ambassador for the (so-called) host country (Yang 2020). This type of short-term credit mobility has long functioned as a form of global influence and soft power exercised alongside formal foreign policy and diplomacy (Akli 2012; Lee 2021). However, most ISM is no longer through credit mobility but rather through degree mobility, which is increasingly linked to individual economic social mobility and migration (OECD 2022) and, to a much lesser but growing extent, protection for displaced students.

As illustrated, developing a comprehensive typology of ISM is a fraught endeavour. Streitwieser's (2019) aforementioned classification organised ISM into three types based on motivation: enlightenment, opportunity, or survival. However, other classifications have been suggested. Beech (2017), for example, identified two main drivers of contemporary ISM: (1) economic (e.g. contributing to career outcomes), and (2) social/cultural (e.g. contributing to self-development and/or intercultural skills). Teichler distinguished between 'mobility for the purpose of study' and 'mobility for study-related purposes', e.g. work experience or language courses (2017, 193). Robertson (2013) placed ISM on a spectrum between so-called unskilled/highly vulnerable migrants on the one end, and elite global knowledge workers on the other end, with international students described as middling transnationals somewhere in the middle. Finally, Stein and Andreotti (2016) articulated three problematic tropes which frame internationally mobile students from a Global North perspective: as (1) 'cash' ('sources of income and intellectual capital that support the continued prosperity of the Western university and nation-state'), (2) 'competition' (inferior competitors in the social mobility 'game'), or (3) 'charity' (recipients of the West's knowledge and development) (2016, 226).

Whether focusing on student motivations, student activities, migrant categories, or discursive framings, each of these important examples suffers from a double-edged sword inherent to neatly classifying social phenomena: while useful in communicating key concepts, their simplicity runs the risk of being misread if taken uncritically. In other words, the full complexities of the intersections between HE, mobility, and migration risk being collapsed. Before proposing our own analytical

framing, we first discuss three interrelated areas of 'messiness' in the field of ISM which make classifications particularly challenging: terms, data, and practices. Paradoxically, the ethical implications bound up in this messiness are what motivate our call for a new conceptualisation of ISM, despite sharing the same risks of misinterpretation as classifications. Like Bivand Erdal and Oeppen (2018), we aim to 'advance analytical discussion of voluntariness, choice and alternatives' while simultaneously 'tackl[ing] the stickiness' of problematic dichotomies and oversimplifications in the study of ISM.

### *Messy terms*

ISM is just one expression of a range of possible migrations and mobilities in the context of global flows (King and Raghuram 2013; Maldonado-Maldonado 2014), and ISM literature uses various terms to describe types of people and movement. However, these terms are used inconsistently. Echoing de Wit's (2023) critique of the 'problematic sloppiness' (14) in usages of the term internationalisation, ISM suffers from messy terms which are used in imprecise, and at times opposing, ways.

Table 1 offers a partial list of key ISM-related terms alongside their common usage (see also International Organization for Migration 2019). This table is not meant to be definitive or authoritative; indeed, all the terms are used in multiple ways, overlap with each other, and are contested. Instead, in the spirit of an 'anti-glossary' (Research with International Students 2022), we seek to improve the field's intelligibility by reflecting on its complexity.

Beyond the issues caused by inconsistent usage, terms are also important to analyse because they hold discursive significance in their organisation and communication of thoughts and values (Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 2018). ISM-related terms often fail to adequately account for the nuance inherent in mobility (Hamlin 2022) and/or overlook its inherent power relations. The term international, for example, typically aligns with nation-state borders, a point mobility studies and critiques of methodological nationalism have usefully identified (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). The state is significant in controlling power differentials, but it is not the only orienting structure. In settler-colonial contexts, sayings such as 'we didn't cross the border, the border crossed us' highlight the disputed nature of colonial boundaries (Brunner 2023b). Yet even critiques of Western immigration restrictions often uphold the continuation of international borders – and, as a result, displacement becomes 'a site of power to embed selective humanitarian practices that facilitate the exercise of hegemony' (Chimni 2009, 24). Focusing only on movement across international state borders not only ignores other types of movements students undergo in the process of becoming internationally mobile but also replicates state-centric perspectives, an enduring issue in the often nationally-organised global competition of international education.

Further examples abound. For instance, while the most common use of the word refugee references a legal definition based in the 1951 Refugee Convention, the very process of distinguishing between a refugee and a migrant is debatable; many have critiqued the legal definition of refugee as primarily serving the needs of states rather than individual migrants (Chimni 2009; Hamlin 2022). Terms such as 'forced migration' and 'survival migration' are used imperfectly to describe a wider spectrum of movement for protection that does not meet the UNHCR's now limited, outdated, Eurocentric legal definition of refugee, the most glaring example being those displaced by climate crises (Betts 2013; Hamlin 2022). Additionally, determining whether a student is engaged in degree mobility as a 'migrant' (with shorter-term intentions) or as an 'immigrant' (with longer-term intentions) is complex given the development of education-migration, or *edugration*, policies (Brunner 2022a).

Ultimately, no matter how 'accurately' a term describes an ISM process, the act of classification introduces ethical paradoxes. Labelling forms of migration holds both discursive and normative power which, in turn, inevitably impacts the treatment of migrants (Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 2018). This demands that scholars 'recognise our own roles in creating, influencing and maintaining or disrupting' such discourses in the terms we use (3).

**Table 1.** Key international student mobility-related terms.

| ISM-related term | Usage |
|---|---|
| Mobility | • Movement of both humans and non-humans (e.g. programmes, providers, institutions, information and funds)<br>• Implies short-term movement<br>• Can be regional (intranational) or international |
| Education(al) mobility | • Educational movement<br>• Can include human mobility or non-human mobility, e.g. programmes (e.g. franchises and virtual programmes) and providers (e.g. branch campuses), etc.<br>• Not necessarily specific to students |
| International student mobility (ISM) | • Movement of students, usually across international borders, for educational purposes<br>• Includes credit (shorter-term mobility for acquiring some part of a credential abroad) and degree (longer-term mobility for obtaining a full degree abroad) mobility<br>• Includes horizontal (movement between similarly-resourced locations) and vertical (movement between significantly differently-resourced locations) mobility |
| Migration | • Usually movement of humans specifically<br>• Implies relatively longer-term movement than mobility, with a stronger possibility of remaining<br>• Can imply movement across or within international borders; sometimes those migrating across international borders are described specifically as 'international migrants' |
| Skilled (or high-skilled) migration; low-skilled migration | • Migration classified by migrants' relative education level and/or work experience<br>• Contested, normative terms; criteria differ globally<br>• International students often positioned as skilled migrants |
| Irregular/undocumented migration | • Migration occurring outside regular/legal migration channels<br>• Contested, normative terms, even when used as an attempted neutral alternative to 'illegal migrant'<br>• May include specific categories of students, e.g. those falling under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in the U.S. |
| Refugee | • Usually someone who (1) is outside their country of nationality, and (2) has a well-founded fear of persecution related to race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (UNHCR 2010)<br>• Usually includes only to those granted legal refugee status; sometimes includes anyone who meets the criteria above (regardless of legal refugee status)<br>• Sometimes also used to describe people persecuted based on reasons not directly addressed above (e.g. 'climate refugee') |
| Forced/survival/vulnerable migration; displacement | • A more expansive term than 'refugee'<br>• May include asylum seeker; asylee; internally displaced person; stateless person; etc. |
| Immigration | • (Often) permanent movement across international borders<br>• Implies more permanent legal status, such as permanent residency or a pathway towards citizenship<br>• 'Immigrant students' usually refers to 'first-generation' immigrants who were born abroad yet have some legal permanent residency status in their country of study<br>• 'Second-generation' students were generally born in their country of study but have at least one immigrant parent<br>• Other terms describe additional nuances, e.g. '1.5-generation' students |
| (Im)migration | • Inclusive of both migration and immigration |
| International student migration; *edugration* | • Sometimes used interchangeably with ISM, particularly in migration studies<br>• Can indicate blurring of ISM and migration |

(*Continued*)

**Table 1.** Continued.

| ISM-related term | Usage |
|---|---|
| International student immigration; *edugration* | • Indicates the blurring of ISM and immigration as part of a growing education-immigration policy nexus (particularly in countries with clear immigration pathways for international student graduates, e.g. Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, etc.) |

## *Messy data*

Related to ISM's messy terms is its messy data. The categories presented in Table 1 are conflated by scholars, HE institutions, politicians, popular media, and governments alike, making international comparisons challenging (OECD 2022). Data on international students varies 'widely from country to country in terms of their timeliness, data definitions, and scope' and suffers from 'variations in national degree and qualifications structures' (Lane and Bhandari 2014, 248). For example, the OECD/UNESCO/Eurostat definition of an international student only counts study of twelve months or longer, excluding students who study abroad for shorter periods of time.

The completeness of student mobility data is another challenge. In the U.S., many institutions – but not all – respond voluntarily to the *Open Doors* survey, which is the most comprehensive data source on international students. Conversely, other key destination countries like Australia, Germany, and the UK gather mobility data primarily through national-level government agencies, allowing for a more complete count of international students (Lane and Bhandari 2014).

An additional data gap is the dearth of *edugration* statistics, i.e. the number of international students who transition to permanent residency (OECD 2022). In the U.S., for example, data on international students and skilled immigrants are maintained separately. Internationally, most data on international students overlooks key developments in the movement and migration of students. As Streitwieser (2019) pointed out, refugees engaged in education are not usually counted as international students and thus theorised separately. Finally, while an in-depth analysis of virtual mobility is beyond the purview of this paper, it is nonetheless worth mentioning COVID-19's significant impact on its provision and, relatedly, the definition and measurement of mobility.

While 'cleaning up' messy data might help, Madianou (2019) cautions against operationalising data collection for extractive purposes. Through the lens of 'technocolonialism', Madianou questions whether data collection, even when part of so-called humanitarian responses to refugee/migration crises, ever simply 'make[s] tangible the previously intangible' (4). Instead, such practices may 'reveal or further occlude histories of exploitation' (4), adding further considerations for ISM researchers to consider.

## *Messy practices*

In addition to messy terms and data, ISM-related practices – e.g. the administration of international student services within HE institutions – are also messy. Here, we briefly highlight contextual points in the U.S. and Canada, where we co-authors reside.

### *U.S.*

U.S. HE systems generally distinguish between two categories of internationally-mobile students for administrative purposes: (1) domestic students with migrant origins/backgrounds, and (2) international students.

- The domestic category usually includes U.S. citizens, permanent residents (i.e. Green Card holders), refugees, asylum grantees, special immigrant visa recipients, humanitarian parolees, and those with temporary protected status. Domestic students typically qualify for financial

aid and may be eligible for in-state tuition at public institutions, but they usually do not receive international student services (Crist 2023).
- The international student category generally includes those on F-1 student visas, J-1 exchange visas, and sometimes J-1 visiting scholar visas. Students on an F-1 or J-1 student visa must comply with a number of academic and immigration-related regulations to maintain their visa status. International students often receive tailored student services to varying degrees. They are generally not eligible for federal financial aid and often pay higher tuition rates, making them an important source of revenue for U.S. institutions (though many at the graduate level are eligible for departmental teaching and research assistantships).

The domestic/international binary is messy in practice. DACA students, for example, are 'DACAmented' in precarious ways, and many immigrant-origin 'domestic' students overlap with international student profiles. 'Documented dreamers' are an additional, and largely invisible, population of students who arrive in the U.S. as dependents of noncitizens yet 'age out' of legal status at age 21.

Most so-called international student services programming on U.S. campuses – e.g. cultural events, individualised orientations, immigration assistance, language courses/programmes, international peer mentor assistance, specialised mental health and career services – excludes certain groups of students due to their visa/immigration status. However, the need to structure student services and affairs more broadly to address a range of diversity and inclusion issues that affect 'international' and immigrant-origin students alike is gaining traction in HE, especially as movements such as Black Lives Matter and the rise of hate crimes targeting specific communities force an acknowledgement of the intersections of race, gender, and Otherness as characterised by a non-dominant culture, language, or heritage (Bhandari and Welch 2022).

### *Canada*

International student services in Canada's HE institutions are also structured by a binary tuition differentiation, and similar complexities apply. However, Canada is even more deeply economically dependent on international students. Except for Quebec, tuition rates at public institutions are typically determined by immigration status (as opposed to the U.S., where in-state versus out-of-state residency is a key factor). In 2022/23, international undergraduate students paid 429% more than Canadian students; overall, international student tuition fees comprised close to 40% of all university tuition fees in recent years (Statistics Canada 2022). The domestic/international binary thus permeates many decisions about student support resourcing, at times superseding the needs and desires of students (Shokirova et al. 2022).

Some Canadian institutions charge domestic tuition to non-citizen students with an affiliation to an Indigenous nation of Canada, or of a transborder Indigenous nation; relatedly, noncitizens with Registered Indian status in Canada do not require a study permit. Additionally, since 1978, the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) has administered a Student Refugee Program (SRP), in which student-run local committees utilise Canada's private refugee sponsorship programme to facilitate the resettlement and education of ∼150 students at ∼100 institutions per year. Because SRP students become permanent residents shortly after arrival, they are not technically considered international students, despite similar characteristics. A private refugee sponsorship programme was introduced in the U.S. 2023, meaning such programmes – along with similar service delivery complexities – may soon expand in the U.S.

## From typology to landscape: the discretion to move and opportunity through movement

As we have shown, messy terms, data, and practices permeate the discourse, study, and operationalisation of ISM today. We thus propose not a classification of ISM but rather a spectrum-oriented

landscape of ISM to better account for this messiness. Using Bivand Erdal and Oeppen's (2018) focus on voluntariness, we reconceptualize Streitwieser's (2019) categories of enlightenment, opportunity, and survival by separating out the elements they hinge upon: (1) the discretion to move (i.e. voluntariness of mobility), and (2) movement's degree of impact on opportunity.

### The discretion to move

The element of discretion in ISM is often presented as a clear-cut distinction: a refugee is forced to migrate, for example, while an international student is not. However, we suggest discretion should be thought of as a spectrum, as layers of less (if not entirely non-) consensual forms of international movement driven by displacement are influenced by inequities driven by both historical and ongoing forces of empire and capitalism (Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 2018; Walia 2013). For example, while one may not *want* to leave their home or community for education, it may be a necessity to achieve upward social mobility – especially for those lacking access to high-quality HE. In another example, a student from a relatively affluent country and socioeconomic class who does not meet the limited definition of a refugee, yet utilises *edugration* in order to live in a gender-affirming way otherwise unavailable to them, may also fall to some degree in a realm of involuntariness.

The concept of voluntariness is complex and undertheorized in migration studies (Ottonelli and Torresi 2018). Questioning the voluntariness of economic migration (e.g. due to colonial histories), and suggesting that a refugee is somehow more virtuous or deserving of mobility, both depend on how Eurocentric legal frameworks evaluate their worth and needs. Ultimately, distinguishing between migration undertaken by force and migration done voluntarily is a question of 'degrees of coercion involving the varied exercise of agency' (Chimni 2009, 12). In this way, voluntariness in migration tends to be a somewhat arbitrary and often discriminatory concept which only justifies processes and discourses of excluding migrants who do not deserve to move (Schweitzer, Humphris, and Monforte 2022). From a legal perspective, the specific definition of a refugee has (arguably diminishing) power and does facilitate some urgently needed protection on an individual basis, despite its many limitations. At the same time, the very process of assessing voluntariness legitimises humanitarian borders, which are inherently exclusionary (Schweitzer, Humphris, and Monforte 2022).

### Opportunity through movement

Most students (including domestic students) seek some form of upward (or, increasingly, horizontal/maintenance of) opportunity through HE generally. However, ISM in particular is increasingly instrumentalised as economically beneficial for individuals, e.g. as good for securing a job or promoting the business value of intercultural understanding (Kratz and Netz 2018). ISM in the form of degree mobility has become a specific form of social mobility through *edugration*, in which obtaining a degree (typically from an institution in a country with a higher GDP than one's own country of citizenship) is part of a long-term possibility of, or a strategy towards, gaining access to new labour markets and/or permanent residency status (Brunner 2022a; 2022b; Kim and Kwak 2019; Maldonado-Maldonado 2014). *Edugration* occurs in many countries across a wide range of policy contexts due to international students being positioned as 'ideal' and 'easily-integrated' economic immigrants; however, outcomes are highly uneven (Brunner 2022a; Sabzalieva et al. 2022). In terms of internationally displaced students, access to education can be significant to one's opportunity, even if it entails regaining a previously high socioeconomic status which is threatened by persecution.

For this reason, it is important to see ISM as a continuum of *opportunity*, rather than social mobility, as well as one which goes beyond oversimplistic binaries such as high/low-skilled (Favell, Feldblum, and Smith 2007; Robertson and Roberts 2022) or upward/downward mobility. For some,

ISM works as it is promoted by governments and HE institutions, resulting in a 'triple win' (Brunner 2022a) in which upward mobility is achieved. However, many international students who engage in *edugration* spend extended periods of time in precarity as they attempt to meet the requirements needed for work authorisation and/or immigration; sometimes, *edugration* is 'unsuccessful' – i.e. migration is not obtained – and may result in downward social mobility due to, for example, student debt. As Favell, Feldblum, and Smith (2007) put it, even so-called high-skilled migration brings 'distinctive challenges' and 'is not a frictionless mobility but rather a differently tracked mobility with its own costs and constraints' (21).

Achieving upward mobility from the perspective of one's home country/community may mean moving to a lower rung on another social mobility hierarchy; in other words, ISM occurs not just on one hierarchy but in a contextual, relative manner. This is because privilege is 'often fragile and contingent and exists in a mutually constituted relationship with marginality and precarity' (Robertson and Roberts 2022, 17). Such privileges connecting social markers such as class, race, nationality, etc. 'are not simply carried by migrants as they move' but are instead 'actively produced, reproduced and transformed by migration processes and regimes' (Robertson and Roberts 2022, 18). Thinking of international students' mobility across a spectrum allows for a more nuanced understanding of 'micro-hierarchies of privilege' (Robertson and Roberts 2022, 21).

### *The interface of discretion and opportunity*

Rather than place international students into a rigid typology, we propose a landscape of ISM that reflects a spectrum structured by the interface of two continuums: discretion and opportunity. In Figure 1, we position (1) the continuum of the discretion to move alongside (2) the continuum of movement's degree of impact on opportunity, and then, as an example, plot the approximate location of three types of ISM on this landscape.

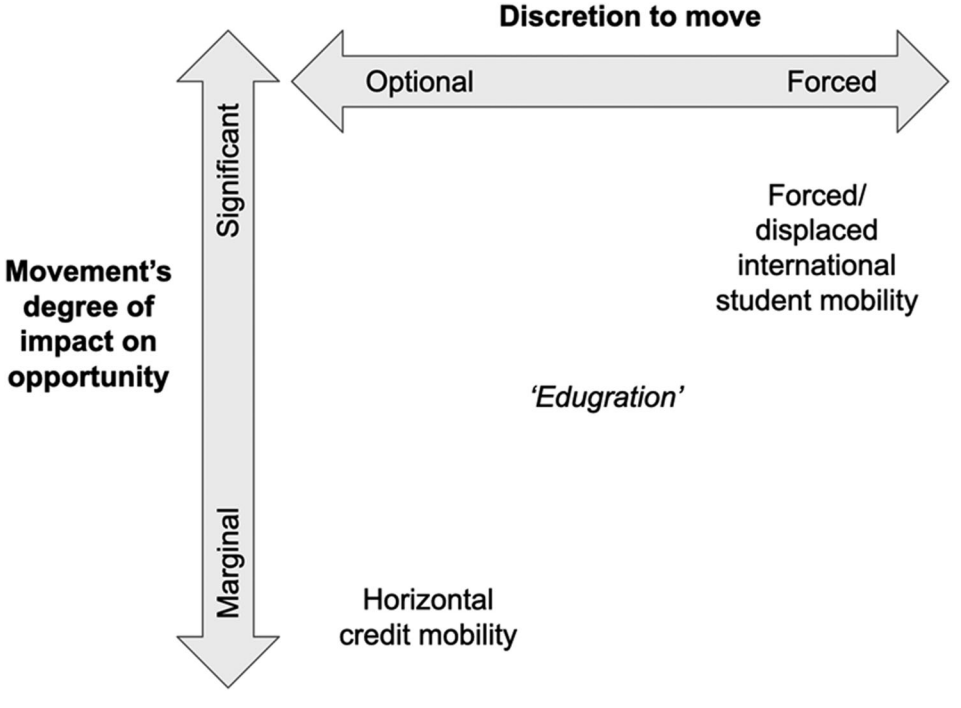


**Figure 1.** The interface of discretion and opportunity in today's international student mobility landscape.

In the example of horizontal credit mobility – i.e. a student spending a term on exchange in a country with a similar GDP – the ISM activity is relatively optional, and the degree of impact on the students' opportunity is relatively marginal (Teichler 2017). This is not to say that horizontal credit mobility has *no* impact on students' opportunity; students may still be or feel compelled, to varying degrees, to study internationally, and the movement may indeed impact their future opportunity through increased social or cultural capital. However, compared to *edugration* – in which a student may complete a degree in a country with a significantly higher GDP than their own, to which they may plan to immigrate – the discretion to move is relatively more constrained, while the impact on opportunity is more directly significant. In the case of forced ISM, a student who is also a refugee may engage in ISM out of necessity for survival, while the movement may have outsized influence on their opportunity which was not afforded to them previously.

Key to our landscape of ISM is the recognition that, while we can observe broad patterns of discretion and impact on opportunity within ISM, there are multitudes of individual and situational variations at play. Some instances of horizontal credit mobility result in more increased opportunity than others. Not all students who pursue *edugration* study in countries with higher GDPs than their own, which may impact the significance of ISM in relation to their opportunity. Similarly, the category of 'forced migrant' includes individuals from an array of socioeconomic statuses; education, sometimes combined with credential recognition, is often (but not necessarily) crucial to a forced migrant's opportunity. In other words, the definition of 'opportunity' itself is highly contextual.

## Conclusion

Ideally, a classification of ISM is more than just an identification of individual student motivations; it should also be a pedagogical provocation which invites discussion. Given the complexities of ISM today, any classification should encourage consideration of the global power dynamics that structure it, with international power differentials and colonial legacies key to that discussion. It is additionally crucial to consider how such categories might be used as disciplinary tools, as the very naming and gathering of subject knowledge is tied up in its regulation (Chimni 2009) and may reproduce 'hierarchies of migrant desirability' that dominate migration regimes and discourse alike (Robertson and Roberts 2022, 20). This includes neoliberal desires for so-called easily integrated economic migrants and the (often white) saviouristic desires for 'innocent' refugees.

Our paper makes four contributions. First, in outlining the messiness of ISM's terms, data, and practices, we problematise the complexity of our subfield. Second, in bridging studies of migration/mobilities and international education, we clarify the relationship between the fields and some commonly-used ISM terms. Third, we stress the need for increased interdisciplinary engagement in the study of ISM. Finally, in offering a landscape of ISM reflecting a spectrum structured by the interface of discretion and opportunity, we provide an updated lens through which ISM can be better understood. This, we hope, will lead to more nuanced discussions of the societal function of ISM today.

To encourage such discussion, we conclude by offering five provocations. First, international education still has more to learn from migration/mobilities studies. For example, the field might focus not just on those who are internationally mobile but also on those who are still/stuck – that is, those who are internally displaced or otherwise unable to engage in international mobility. Second, ISM definitions and classifications – particularly the definition of 'international student' – likely do not reflect the reality of migration today, and HE institutions and governments alike might reconsider outdated terms which ultimately impede service provision, data collection, and ethical decision-making. Third, more consideration of ISM's intersections with equity, diversity, inclusion, decolonisation, and social justice is needed. How will future global disruptions, such as climate change, impact inequities – for example, potentially limiting education pathways for displaced students if there is a push away from physical mobility? How could differential tuition fee policies, differential programming, and exclusionary admission practices be different? Fourth, HE may

create its own 'HE borders' through administrative bordering practices (Brunner 2023a). Academic pathways and support programmes for displaced students, for example, often rely on discretion and sympathy, suggesting the need for stronger rights-based arguments (Murray 2022).

Finally, we ask: how is HE *itself* engaged in ISM for enlightenment, opportunity, and/or survival *as a sector*? Many have categorised rationales for internationalisation (Meiras 2004; Stier 2004) and international student recruitment (Bolsmann and Miller 2008) among Global North HE institutions along similar lines as Streitwieser (2019): for academic, idealistic/developmental, and/or economic reasons. However, in the case of some institutions and even systems, HE's participation in ISM has moved beyond the dominant economic rationale into 'survivability' due to the depth of dependency on international student enrolment. This raises key questions about HE's *own* discretion to engage in ISM.

Ultimately, migration 'speaks deeply to people's beliefs about who is deserving of humanitarian protection, what governments are obligated to offer, and the merits of a diverse society' (Hamlin 2022, para. 27). As education increasingly entangles with migration and mobility, scholars and practitioners alike need to more critically consider HE's shifting roles in this domain.

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