International student mobility within Europe: responding to contemporary challenges

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Abstract

In this article, we provide an introduction to the special issue on 'Challenges to International Student Mobility within Europe'. We first discuss the current context of such mobility and justify our focus on Europe, in particular, by outlining some distinctive features of this geographical region. We then outline the contributions of the articles that make up the special issue—in terms of the challenges they identify, the ways in which they theorise international student mobility, and the responses they proffer. Throughout, we acknowledge the rich extant literature on international student mobility and weave this into our discussion as appropriate.

Keywords International student mobility · Higher education · Europe · Policy · Internationalisation

Current context

In many European nations, governments have placed considerable importance on processes of internationalisation within the higher education sector and, in particular, on further enhancing international student mobility (e.g. Department of Education and Skills, 2015; Government of Ireland, 2018; UK Government, 2019). Attracting inward mobility (through 'whole degree' as well as short-term or 'credit' mobility) is seen as an effective means of developing more diverse campuses, furthering the inter-cultural experiences and skills of 'home' students; bolstering the financial position of higher education institutions through the fees paid by incoming students; and exerting 'soft power' when graduates return home (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Indeed, challenging targets have been set to increase the number of incoming students (Faas, 2020). Outward mobility has also increasingly come to be prioritised (primarily through credit mobility) although this policy emphasis is relatively

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recent in countries such as the UK and Ireland that have focused mainly on international student recruitment. Outgoing mobility is framed primarily as a means of enhancing the inter-cultural and entrepreneurial skills of students—and thus, it is assumed, their employ-ability (Courtois, 2020; Papatsiba, 2009). Such governmental objectives have tended to be taken up enthusiastically by individual higher education institutions, many of which have developed their own mobility schemes in addition to making use of established schemes such as the European Union's Erasmus+ mobility programme (Courtois, 2018; Faas, 2020).

In many ways, Europe is not significantly different from other parts of the world in the priority it gives to international student mobility—as a means of generating income, exert-ing soft power, demonstrating prestige, and enhancing cultural diversity within higher edu-cation classrooms. Attracting mobile students has long been a key policy aim of the USA and Australia, for example (Kim, 2023; Thomas, 2024), and has more recently been taken up with vigour in numerous other nations including China, Japan, Brazil, South Africa, and Morocco (e.g. Gunter & Raghuram, 2018; Mazzella, 2011; Mulvey, 2021; Waters & Brooks, 2021). Nevertheless, Europe does differ from other parts of the world in relation to international student mobility in a number of respects, which help to justify a focus on this particular geographical region. Mobility has been given a high profile because of the vari-ous ways in which it has been foregrounded in regional policy, as a means of inculcating a stronger European identity, developing the European labour market, and promoting Euro-pean higher education beyond the continent (King, 2003; Maiworm, 2001; Teichler, 2001). Indeed, a key aim of the European Higher Education Area, that came into existence in 2010, was for at least 20% of European students to experience mobility to a foreign higher education institution. The European Union's Erasmus scheme, launched in 1987, has been instrumental in facilitating the short-term mobility of students across Europe, while the Erasmus Mundus programme has provided mobility opportunities for students outside of Europe. More recently, the European Universities Initiative (EUI) has encouraged the cross-border mobility of students between the different higher education institutions that make up the EUI alliances (Brooks & Rensimer, 2023; Rensimer & Brooks, 2024).

In addition, Europe differs from some other parts of the world with respect to how its patterns of international student mobility are linked to its colonial past. This is perhaps most marked with respect to the UK, which has a long history of educating students from its colonies, and continues to benefit from these historical relationships today (for example, India remains one of the most important 'source' countries for mobile students) (Ploner & Nada, 2020). Nevertheless, it is also played out in other national contexts, too. França et al. (2018) have shown how the Portuguese government has capitalised on its former colonial relationships to increase its own numbers of international students. Moreover, Morocco and Algeria remain the top two sending countries for France, despite the implementation of successive policies aimed at recruiting fewer students from these regions and shifting to a more commercial model of internationalisation (Kabbanji & Toma, 2020).

While Europe continues to be a popular destination for international students (albeit with significant variation between countries—see van Mol, 2014), at present the region faces a number of important challenges, which provide the context for this special issue. First, the political situation within Europe has changed considerably over recent years—related to, for example, Brexit (and the future of the Erasmus+ scheme) (Courtois & Veiga, 2020; Mayhew, 2017); the growing significance of China on the world stage and as an increasingly popular destination for mobile students (Jiani, 2017); and the emergence of various 'regional hubs' (e.g. in Africa, the Middle East, and East Asia) which offer a cheaper international alternative than Europe to prospective students (Kondakci et al.,

2018). Migration policy within Europe has also had a notable impact on the perceived desirability of international students, with restrictions introduced in Denmark, the Netherlands, and the UK, for example, because of concerns about overall levels of immigration, the availability of higher education places for domestic students, and/or the cost of teaching international students (e.g. Dixon, 2024). Second, there is increasing awareness of the environmental costs of physical mobility and the responsibility of higher education institutions with respect to climate change (Facer, 2019; Shields, 2019), alongside the impact of global health concerns, brought into sharp relief by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ilieva & Raimo, 2020). Third, the relative lack of socio-economic diversity amongst international students remains a challenge. Despite some initiatives to widen participation (e.g. UUK, 2017), those who are internationally mobile are still more likely to be from socially privileged families, and, where opportunities have been opened up more broadly, they have tended to become stratified, with those from lower income families clustered in lower quality schemes that may be valued less by employers (Courtois, 2018; Slowey et al., 2020; Yang, 2018). Such patterns are exacerbated by the ongoing cost of living crisis in many European countries and a decrease in state support for students and, in particular, international students (where it existed previously).

Informed by this background, and the wider extant literature on international student mobility within Europe, this special issue extends our understanding of contemporary challenges; such a focus is, we argue, crucial for understanding the future direction of student mobility within Europe in the post-Brexit, post-COVID era.

Empirical contributions of this special issue: outlining the challenges

This special issue brings together eight papers—drawing on a range of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives and focused on a number of European countries—which engage directly with some of the challenges outlined above, with the aim of generating new knowledge about international student mobility within Europe. Although the focus is primarily on whole-degree mobility, it also includes one article that explores the challenges associated with short-term mobility, as part of a degree programme in a student's 'home' country. In all cases, however, the authors refer to the crossing of physical borders, rather than virtual or blended forms of mobility. The special issue addresses six specific challenges facing international student mobility at the current time, which we outline below. Although this is not an exhaustive list (the special issue does not, for example, discuss the impact of the rise of populism and neo-nationalism in some European countries), it nevertheless highlights the range of issues to which policy and practice need to respond.

First, the articles by Brooks and Waters and by Shields and Lu consider some of the geopolitical challenges bound up with international student mobility. In their analysis of the UK's 'Turing Scheme' (introduced post-Brexit to replace the European Union's 'Erasmus+' scheme), Brooks and Waters note that a key objective of the scheme is promoting 'Global Britain' through 'forging new relationships across the world'. They also show that the term 'global' appeared repeatedly on the study-abroad-focussed webpages of the UK universities to convey the widespread opportunities for mobility they ostensibly offered their students. Nevertheless, in practice, the mobility opportunities offered by such universities typically centre on Anglophone Global North countries and European countries with whom established relationships already exist. In this way, previously entrenched patterns of geographical inequality are largely reinforced. The article by Shields and Lu makes a

somewhat similar argument, contending that international student mobility tends to reinforce historical flows rather than facilitate new ones. Specifically, they suggest that European programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Higher Education Area promote knowledge circulation within Europe rather than looking beyond the continent. They see this as a significant challenge for decolonising higher education mobilities and highlight the need for more reciprocal arrangements with other parts of the world.

Second, the special issue attends to the challenges posed by the climate crisis. Scholarship on international student mobility has tended to be slow to discuss this particular issue, as has practice within individual higher education institutions. The article by Shields and Lu thus addresses a typically under-discussed area. In their extended analysis of this particular challenge, they note the difficulties of reconciling higher education mobilities with the wider climate crisis, as by definition international student mobility is often dependent on air travel. As universities tend actively to recruit international students, this stands in opposition to their wider sustainability goals or agendas. Moreover, Shields and Yu argue that when higher education practitioners—and also many scholars—consider issues about fairness and equality, they typically see nature as a resource to be apportioned fairly, rather than something that has inherent rights of its own, in need of protection.

The third challenge also relates to the idea of fairness, by considering the social backgrounds of those who participate in international student mobility. As noted above, there is now a sizable body of literature that has identified the inequalities in mobility opportunities, arguing that it tends to be the more privileged who move across international borders for their higher education, often with a socially reproductive effect. Although some recent studies have indicated that students from a wider range of social backgrounds are now involved in international student mobility, they have also shown that opportunities are becoming increasingly stratified (e.g. Courtois, 2018; Waters & Brooks, 2021; Yang, 2018). Mihut's article argues that international student mobility's role in exacerbating existing inequalities is a key challenge it faces. This is perhaps particularly the case within Europe, where various national governments, as well as the European Union, have sought to reduce inequalities within higher education more broadly. Mihut contends that in a context in which questions are asked about the value of educational mobility—in relation to ideas about social justice as well as about sustainability—it is important that we are clear what such mobility can offer at a societal level, as well as to individuals. The article by Brooks and Waters discusses widening participation in international student mobility in the context of the UK's Turing Scheme. They demonstrate that while the scheme has emphasised widening participation as one of its key objectives, this emphasis is not reflected in UK universities' study-abroad-focussed webpages. Brooks and Waters argue that this could represent a missed chance to promote the scheme to demographics that typically do not engage in international mobility. Moreover, in cases where an access agenda *was* mentioned on university websites, it was almost exclusively in relation to students who were socio-economically disadvantaged, with very little explicit reference made to other under-represented groups (e.g. disabled students, ethnic minorities, mature students). This, again, could deter some of these other under-represented groups from taking advantage of the scheme. Brooks and Waters also show that the Turing scheme actively promotes diversity in both the nature and duration of 'study abroad'. This is reflected in the opportunities for study abroad being provided by UK universities, with many expanding their study-abroad opportunities beyond traditional credit mobility to include internships, summer placements, and volunteering, and offering opportunities of shorter duration. On the one hand, this could have a positive impact on widening participation, as short-term mobility programmes may appeal to students from less privileged backgrounds. On the other

hand, Brooks and Waters also draw attention to how more privileged students may have access to different and higher quality opportunities, which could serve to reproduce existing inequalities. A more wholly positive perspective on widening participation is provided in the article by Lopez. On the basis of her analysis of the Mexican scholarship scheme to fund doctoral study in Europe, she argues that it has exerted a widening participation function. Over a third of those awarded a scholarship through the scheme in the period she analysed, from 1997 to 2005, chose to study in Europe, and, for many of this group, mobility had been a transformative experience, facilitating upward social mobility.

The fourth challenge—the affordability crisis in international student mobility—is likely to impact particularly severely students from less privileged social backgrounds, but its effects are often felt well beyond this particular group. The articles by Guigui et al. and by Yu and He outline various aspects of this crisis. Focussing specifically on international doctoral students in Ireland, Guigui et al. show that, across the country, there is a difference in academic engagement between international doctoral students and their domestic counterparts with the former group engaging less. This is explained, to some extent, by the financial insecurity experienced by many of the international students. They suggest that this insecurity is linked to the high living costs in Ireland and also the high fees paid by such students. These themes are reflected in the article by Yu and He, which discusses the experiences of Chinese students, who deferred their postgraduate study instead of moving directly from an undergraduate course to a master's programme. Although their decisions to defer were largely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic (see below), the article also discusses the impact of financial considerations on students' international plans. Due to the availability of one-year master's degrees, the UK is a relatively cheap destination for students, and deferring was for some a better investment of time and money than choosing a closer destination like Japan.

The article by Yu et al. speaks to the fifth challenge outlined by the special issue—that of racism and discrimination. They draw on a study of Chinese international students' experiences of racialised microaggressions in the UK to both deconstruct and challenge post-racial discourses circulating in the UK. They show how the responses to such racism and discrimination are not uniform; Chinese students react in different ways. While some students responded by denying racism, others sought to justify it, constructing it as normal. Other students took the blame upon themselves, while a final group responding by linking it to what they perceived to be their wider 'invisibility' in the institution in which they were studying. Yu et al. argue that the experiences of these international students are linked closely to the neo-orientalism and everyday racism that pervades British society.

The final challenge identified by the contributions to this special issue is that connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yu and He show, for example, how the border restrictions imposed by many countries for extended periods severely curtailed the choices of many international students, particularly those from China. They argue that the UK came to be positioned, despite some of the problems outlined above, as a 'choice of no choice'—it offered a shorter master's programme than that available in many other countries (of one year as opposed to two), thus allowing them to 'make up' for the self-imposed 'gap year' (between undergraduate studies in China and postgraduate studies abroad) they explained that they had had to take because of the pandemic. In their article, Jokila and Mathies also focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, but on international students who were already abroad—in Finland—when lockdowns were implemented. Jokila and Mathies explain how the international master's students in their sample deployed five different yet interlinked strategies to access information during the pandemic. Across the sample, they note that students needed more information in English about the Finnish context that they were given.

While it was relatively straightforward for them to access English-language information about other parts of the world, it was often lacking with respect to their local context, and their Finnish was sometimes insufficient to interpret the Finnish language information they were being provided with. This, Jokila and Mathies suggest, placed some international students at a greater health risk than their domestic peers.

Many, if not all, of these challenges are, of course, not specific to Europe. Racism and discrimination are, for example, experienced by students in many other nations—including the USA and Australia (e.g. Ma, 2020; Robertson, 2013). Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge to international students (and those hoping to recruit them) in many parts of the world. Nevertheless, Europe remains an interesting case because of the large number of international students who choose to study on the continent; the legacy of European colonialism that continues to affect the experiences of international students; and the high priority given to student mobility by European universities and policymakers.

Theorising international student mobility

In theorising the impact (actual and/or potential) of international student mobility, several of the special issue papers draw on the concept of 'public good', either explicitly or implicitly. This is understood in various different ways in the articles. In their article, Shields and Lu argue that the narrative of higher education as a public good needs to consider its wider environmental impact. They note that as the public goods typically associated with higher education mobility are intangible (such as the spread of ideas, knowledge, and communication), this may result in the environmental costs of these practices being overlooked. They thus call for a reframing of the value of international student mobility and recognition that environmental stewardship and associated policy decisions have clear and widespread benefits. Mihut also uses the concept of public good in her article, asking whether student mobility can contribute to democratisation and human development. Her findings suggest that studying abroad is positively associated with enhanced trust in others, political participation, higher self-reported competency levels, and happiness, underlining the public good value of international student mobility. While not addressing the concept of public good explicitly, Lopez makes implicit reference to ideas associated with the term by arguing that international student mobility can facilitate human development through both social mobility and career development. Similarly, Brooks and Waters address the concept implicitly, by showing how, on UK university websites, study abroad and the role of internationally mobile students is framed almost entirely in terms of personal benefits (thus signally the absence of more publicly-oriented rationales).

Other conceptual frameworks are deployed elsewhere in the special issue. Indeed, Yu et al. invoke concepts of neo-racism, neo-orientalism, post-racial discourse and everyday racism to frame their discussions of the racialised experiences of Chinese international students across UK universities following the COVID-19 pandemic. Anti-Asian racism remains largely under-theorised in the UK, and these concepts allow for an examination of historical and contemporary dimensions of racialisation of East Asian communities including the frequent invisibility of their racialised experiences. Jokila and Mathies use concepts of crisis communication and information equality to develop a better understanding of international student media usage. Informational equality means that different actors in society (such as international students) receive information in different ways which may result in inequalities. Media space is conceptualised as constantly reforming and evolving as public information

was updated and changed during the pandemic. This enables the authors to analyse the communication practices and language choices in the Finnish national crisis communication during the pandemic as a rhizome, referring to the unstructured and evolving connections international students described in accessing media during the pandemic.

Responses to challenges

As well as outlining six key challenges facing international student mobility within Europe, the special issue also explores various possible responses—on the part of policymakers, practitioners, and other social actors—to the identified challenges. This is not an area in which there has been little policy action—the European Commission, for example, has sought to refocus the Erasmus+ scheme to attend to the challenges of both the climate crisis and social inequalities in participation. Nevertheless, the special issue suggests that further action is needed by regional and international bodies, national organisations, and individual higher education institutions. We discuss each of these in turn.

In their analysis of the environmental challenges of international student mobility, Shields and Lu note that schemes such as Erasmus+ rely largely on air travel. This could put such mobility in opposition to the European Union's wider goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2050. Shields and Lu are thus broadly welcoming of the 2021-27 agenda for the Erasmus+ programme in which, to mitigate against further damage to the climate, participating students are encouraged to use alternative forms of transport to reach their study destinations, in an attempt to promote greener and more sustainable choices. As alluded to above, Shields and Yu also encourage all those involved in international student mobility, including international and regional organisations, to adopt a broadly post-humanist perspective in which nature is seen as having inherent rights.

Several articles argue for change at the level of the nation-state. The articles by Yu and He and by Guigui et al. both suggest that nation-states need to do more to help students navigate financial challenges, particularly in the current European context where the cost of living has risen substantially and fees for international students are often very high. Mihut's article draws our attention to the prevailing migration regime in different nations. It suggests that hostile migration regimes should be reconsidered because of the negative impact they have on students who are understood as migrants (rather than temporary visitors). Similarly, Jokila and Mathies contend that more attention needs to be paid to the ways in which national governments frame and communicate about particular issues. Specifically, they highlight the need for accurate, timely information and in languages that reach all residents in Finland, including international students—particularly at times of crisis. Finally, rather than arguing for change, Lopez argues in her article that the nation-state has already been effective in facilitating some social mobility, evidenced through the Mexican scheme that funded doctoral study in Europe (and elsewhere).

Finally, four of the articles advocate for change at the level of individual higher education institutions. Brooks and Waters maintain that the UK's Turing Scheme could be better marketed by institutions to student groups who are traditionally less likely to engage in international mobility, including to those groups who are disadvantaged for reasons beyond socio-economic status/background. Yu et al. call for universities to pay more attention to student welfare. They also assert that universities must reject normalisations of everyday racism and help racialised individuals realise that the discrimination they may face is not their fault. Moreover, all stakeholders working within higher education institutions should receive better

training about the diversity of their communities, to help increase the visibility of minority ethnic groups. In general, Yu et al. argue, more needs to be done, across institutions, to increase awareness of the perspectives, experience, and presence of international students. Finally, Guigui et al. focus our attention on particular pedagogical relations within higher education institutions, suggesting that the relationship between a supervisor and international doctoral student can often be key to helping such students mediate the challenges they face.

Together, the articles in the special issue underscore vulnerability as well as resilience and adaptation to change in international student mobility. Moving between the micro and the macro and between qualitative studies exploring students' experiences of racism and a large-scale examination of changed perceptions, the special issue draws attention to the different levels which impact international student mobility—individual and family motivations, institutional mechanisms, national and international policy, and indeed, environmental issues at planetary level—and to how different policy spheres interact to shape it. Our regional focus has helped grasp the implications of trends in other regions, and global phenomena, on flows within, and in and out of Europe, as further evidence of the multiple interconnections at play in international student mobility and the need for continued transnational, transdisciplinary research in the area.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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