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Lost in Status? Temporary, Permanent, Potential, Highly Skilled:

The International Student Mobility

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Abstract

Despite their expanding significance in a globalizing world today, international students are not thoroughly studied. The international student mobility is not a contemporary phenomenon, yet the examination of such mobility within theoretical concepts is a contemporary one. The concept of transnational social space combines the sending and receiving contexts used in analyzing different forms of migration; however not for international students yet. This article first examines the general definitions in the literature related to international student mobility and shows the complexity regarding to their status. Then it suggests the necessity and convenience of applying transnational social space concept as a tool used currently in migration studies.

Introduction

Recently "international migration, with its intricate web of demographic, social, economic and political determinants and consequences, is a topic that has moved to the forefront of national and international agenda" (United Nations [UN], 2000) and "ranks as one of the most important factors in global change" (Castles & Miller, 2003: 4). As a result of increased globalization of world trade, foundation of new technologies for international communication and transportation, political instabilities and uneven economic development, a new international migration regime is on the way to being established. Brain drain which "refers to emigration of skilled and professional personnel from developing countries to advanced industrialized nations" (Miyagiwa, 1991) in a general sense is one of the major concerns in this new regime and the beginning point of considering the developmental aspects of flow of international students or professionals. While in the early literature (1960s) the term 'brain gain' was the main idea by economists for the developing countries; in the 1970s and 1980s the idea shifted to 'brain drain' with a negative connotation for the sending countries. Since the 1990s in the recent literature, the academic and political expectations changed again and on the contrary to the neoclassical economic models, the term 'brain circulation' began to be widely used by some experts and politicians in industrialized countries in need of highly-skilled personnel. The term implies a potential return to the home country after a cycle of study and work abroad and enjoy the promising employment possibilities (Johnson & Regets, 1998: 3) emphasizing potential gains in different realms for all actors involved. Therefore, industrialized countries have decided to embrace international students with the purpose of gaining the best brains in the competition.

Other than brain-drain paradigm there has been little research on international student mobility (at least in the European context); however "the movement of students is now a global phenomenon" (King, 2003). Furthermore, "one of the major migration growth industries in recent years has been that of international students" (Salt, 2005: 28) whose numbers are on the rise as a result of the internationalization of higher education systems and the changing nature of labor markets in sending and receiving countries. The topic of international student mobility is understudied or partially studied. There are studies of international student mobility concerning their scale and dynamics (OECD, 2001a); their migration processes (Agrawal & Winkler, 1985; King, 2003); favorable state policies and regulations (Kuptsch, 2003a, 2003b; OECD, 2001b); employment opportunities in the destination countries (Paganoni & Todisco, 1995); structured study abroad programs fostering student mobility (Teichler, 1996, 1997; Teichler & Steube, 1991) and about the developmental effects of highly skilled on their homelands (Patterson, 2006; Docquier & Rapoport, 2004, 2007) that generally address the

worldwide increase in their numbers and impacts while emphasizing the need for more research highlighting international student mobility. Moreover, most of the studies concerning international student mobility are not really entirely empirical; they often are based on anecdotal findings and tend to be descriptive.

Even though there is an intensifying academic interest and changing national policies in favor of international students, there is not much known about international students, particularly information is lacked on their social, cultural, academic, support networks operating across nation- states; their identity construction; their changing experiences shaped by interactions among customs, norms, and values of both sending and receiving contexts; perception of themselves as migrants and their relations with already existing migrant communities in the receiving context.

Conceptualizing international student mobility

The primary ambiguity in the literature is how to address international students, in the frame of mobility or migration? For instance in the early studies, the phenomenon was related to 'brain drain' paradigm since the movement of students across national borders were seen as a type of migration especially for undergraduate or postgraduate programs where the duration is longer than other programs (Skeldon, 1997). Nevertheless, in the European context, the term mobility is preferred especially for study and work abroad programs where the duration is short and often is a part of an exchange framework (such as Jallade & Gordon, 1996; Murphy-Lejeune, 2003; Teichler, 1996; West, 2001 as cited in Findlay et al., 2006). Therefore, the time frame is the main indicator of the language in the literature, if it is for short term then it is obviously temporary in nature and not seen as a form of migration for instance, contrary to temporary low skilled migration schemes. International students are seen as migrants only if they are in the county of education for a longer period of time since it would involve a change in their life course or increase in their language abilities and highly likely employed upon their graduation. Therefore, international students cannot be categorized as temporary or permanent migrants (or sometimes they are not migrants at all) since it is dynamic and the group is not a homogeneous one which is not taken into consideration often.

Furthermore, regarding to the status of international students, the UK example illustrates the changes in time very well:

> "The traditional UK view of admitting foreign students to the country was that this was
> a temporary flow of people, the vast majority of whom would return home at the end of

their studies....[however] the figures point to an increasing tendency for overseas students to stay in the UK on completion of their studies, corroborating the view that international student migration to the UK involves much more than just the training of the best minds from around the world and that to some extent it contributes to the UK making a net brain gain as a result of being a major player in the internationalization of education" (Findlay & Stam, 2006: 13).

Given the definition, turning to its conceptualization, the existing literature advocates that there are three ways of theorizing student mobility (King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003). According to the first perspective international students are a *subset of highly skilled migration*. International students are seen as a stock of highly skilled personnel and in some European countries the visa regulations are relaxed and for instance, in Germany giving international students the opportunity to stay for one more year to search for employment when they complete their studies. In other words, "student mobility is another form of mobility by the highly skilled, given the potential for foreign students to enter the host country workforce upon graduation" (Salt, 2005: 28). As in the case of attracting highly skilled, in attracting international students - who are a part of the highly skilled and have a potential to be an immigrant in the long run- the states of the EU have recently took actions. Moreover, the literature in Europe recognizing foreign students as a stock of highly skilled immigrants is evolving whereas it has been studied in the U.S. (Agrawal & Winkler, 1985), Canada and Australia for a long time.

As a precursor to the brain drain phenomenon, the migration of students highlights exceptional details of the dynamics and trends of semi-finished human capital (in the case of undergraduate students) equally as highly skilled capital (in the case of postgraduate students in specialized areas, such as Master's degree and Ph. D. programs). In this context, the figures show the obvious (Guerrero & Bolay, 2005). According to data from the OECD, approximately 1.5 million students studied in another OECD member state in 2000, while more than fifty per cent came from non-OECD countries. Furthermore, the number of foreign students in OECD countries has doubled over the past twenty years to 1.6 million.

Second, student mobility "has been analyzed as a *product of globalization*, both generally (as flows of people accelerate between integrating economies), and more specifically as national higher education sectors restructure around internationally defined standards and training appropriate to a global economy" (Altbach & Teichler, 2001; Kwiek, 2001 as cited in Findlay et al., 2006). International student mobility is one of the major issues in internationalization of higher education systems that refers to an incorporation of all aspects of higher education systems or institutions that goes beyond national borders or that is influenced by or cooperates with students, academic staff, administrators, institutions, governments or other stake holders in other countries (Thorsby, 1991: 8). The Bologna Process made possible to have a

common structure of higher education systems among European countries and in return attract more students both nationally and internationally.

"A third interpretative strand places international student mobility within research on *youth mobility cultures and the geographies of consumption*" (Mansvelt, 2005 as cited in Findlay et al., 2006). This kind of movement is not determined by economic factors but rather by experiential factors have a crucial role. Those international students have experienced different locales and as a result they have a greater agency in self-identification. Therefore their transnational experiences differ from a traditional international student since they had transnational stages during their biography development. According to this perspective, reflected in the study of Findlay et al. transnational experiences are expressed itself as various forms of capital, particularly social and cultural ones. Thus, international students are seen as migratory elite who are ready and enthusiastic to move and unrestricted to transformations in their environment (2006). However, I believe they are less in numbers and not all international students are having a transnational activity. Otherwise, we would have called the group transnational students and not international students. Still, regardless of their statuses or categories they belong to, it is important to recognize the transnational activities of international students which is often neglected. Therefore, next sections will introduce the concepts of transnationalism, transnational social spaces and their application to international student studies.

Transnationalism

While the term 'international' characterizes the relations between nation-states, the notion of 'transnationalization' highlights the construction of cross-border social spaces in which non-state actors perform a role too (Faist, 2004). It begins from a diverse set of presuppositions about social organization than the usual ones used by social scientists and policy makers. In general, it is an approach to migration that highlights the attachments that migrants preserve to people, traditions and causes external to the boundaries of the host country (Vertovec, 2002: 4). It positions migrants within social spaces which connects numerous national territories rather than imagining them to commute between two restricted states and exchange one national identity for another. As clearly defined by Faist (2000b), "*transnational social spaces are combinations of social and symbolic ties, positions in networks and organizations an networks of organizations that can be found in at least two geographically and internationally distinct places*" (p.40).

In the last decade literature of migration have seen expanding studies about transnational approach which stresses the migrants' continuous links to people, traditions and causes outside the boundaries of their host states (Glick-Schiller et al., 1992, Portes et al., 1999a, Smith & Guarnizo, 1998, Vertovec & Cohen, 1999). This new transnational perspective accents the various ways of how and why the connections of present time are different or more intense than the earlier types (Foner, 1997; Morawska, 1999; Portes et al., 1999b as cited in Vertovec, 2002). Furthermore transnationalism asserts that contemporary migrants live in 'transnational communities' and they are consist of:

> …dense networks across political borders created by immigrants in their quest for economic advancement and social recognition. Through these networks, an increasing number of people are able to live dual lives. Participants are often bilingual, move easily between different cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political and cultural interests that require their presence in both (Portes, 1997: 812).

International migration is not contemporary, notwithstanding the development of theoretical perspectives analyzing the different types of mobility is deep-seated. According to the study of Barré et al. (2003) about two thirds of tertiary level students from the developing countries of South remain in the receiving countries of the North upon completion of their studies and form a new type of migrant category. Yet, the studies are premature especially those employing a transnational lens to this particular phenomenon.

International student mobility and transnational social spaces

The notion of transnational social spaces postulates a conceptual space that combines diverse contexts of countries of origin and educational locations found abroad to clarify negotiations of international student and offers a model of the utility and benefit of adopting and applying theoretical constructs from transnational discourses (Gargano, 2008). A transnational social space is "an unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks that extends across the borders of two or more nation-states and that incorporates its participants in the day-to-day activities of social reproduction in these various locations" (Glick-Schiller & Fouron, 2001: 544) and embraces those who are mobile and who are not.

Transnational social spaces are for the interchange, organization, and reconstruction of ideas, practices, and social networks. However, migration studies rarely investigate educational contexts of international students. Scholars of transnational migration advocate that even though the world is politically and economically organized and ruled by the nation-

states, facets of our lives can be understood by social and cultural processes that transcend geographical borders (Glick-Schiller & Levitt, 2006). Moreover, transnationalism introduces new perspectives for investigating and analyzing the phenomenon of international migration, including those crossing borders for educational reasons. A transnational social space has a tremendous potential for expanding the comprehension and analyzing the possibilities of cross-border education through student-defined spaces (Gargano, 2008).

Transnationalism suggests to research "the changing role and nature of the state by keeping state processes and structures within our frame of analysis and yet not confining our field of study within the borders of any one state" (Glick-Schiller, 2005: 440). However, the student mobility literature is overshadowed by country comparisons and statistics analyses and the national and international level trends.

Even though international students are not specifically researched under transnationalism studies, they form unquestionably a migrating population and function in transnational social spaces. Different from those students who study abroad for a short period of time (such as exchange students, or one year master students) international doctoral students are living in multiple social spaces for a considerable amount of time, going back and forth between the sending and receiving states, traveling for conferences and adjusting to their campus life. At the same time, doctoral students remain as family members in their sending countries, may also be forming families of their own in the country of study, while attending classes, engaging in campus activities, interacting with host societies, because of that they form and maintain social networks across national territories. International doctoral students conciliate transnational social spaces across boundaries and form social networks in order to maintain social, familial, economic, religious, and political relations with contexts of origin. Analyzing the mobility of international doctoral students by a transnational lens remarks the idea that they are in fact living in oscillating worlds at the crossroads of the economic, political, social, personal and academic contexts of different nation-states.

An analysis done by the help of transnational social spaces would contribute to an analytical framework which refuses the generalization or homogenization of international students (Gargano, 2008) and also recognizes the diversity in nationality, ethnicity and identity. Moreover, it would allow to incorporate evolving contexts where the relations are not attached geographically and yet the transnational networks are created and maintained.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is crucial to study the movements of tertiary education students who, as semi-finished human capital (Khadria, 2001), have an exceptional value which should not be allowed to be ignored (Guerrero & Bolay, 2005). One major point highlighted in this article is the ambiguity of their status depending on the time frame mostly. Despite their changing statuses or categories, in the discourse, the experiences of international students are absent. Therefore, many different aspects are not really explored and understood.

The purpose of this study was to show what has been neglected and propose a meso-level analysis to be included in the literature. Even though the effects of globalization and internationalization of higher education systems, the relaxed admittance regulations have been studied, there is still a need for further research in other areas such as social, academic and friendship networks of international students. It would also mean an introduction of meso-level analysis into macro-level analysis domination. Transnationalism which stresses individuals as members of networks and communities engaged in cross-cultural exchanges is a great conceptual tool to realize this kind of analysis. Various kinds of networks formed by international students would enable us to understand drivers and barriers of student mobility not only at the state level. Because as in the case of labor migration, international student mobility may be operating through chains and channels. Moreover, a transnational lens would allow us to acknowledge how different types of networks (both national and transnational) contribute to student identity (re)construction. It would facilitate a deeper understanding of dual lives of international students. It is also obvious that a deeper understanding of different issues surrounding international student mobility will show itself as better and adaptable policies and practices in international higher education system.

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