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A 'Pluralist Internationalist' Approach to Global Justice in International Student Recruitment

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Abstract: The number of international students in the UK has risen considerably in recent years. These students, now constituting around one-fifth of the student body in UK universities, are viewed primarily in terms of the economic benefits they bring to the host country, and there has been little explicit discussion around equity principles that might inform future international student recruitment. Responding to calls for further consideration of the ethics of this situation, this article seeks to offer a novel perspective by drawing on a “pluralist internationalist” theory of global justice. This theory grants unique normative relevance to the state, whilst at the same time embedding the state within multiple other grounds of justice that are global in scope, thereby contributing to the disentanglement of some of the normative disagreements that characterise debates about global justice. The suggestions that result from applying this theory offer a substantive alternative to both the nationally-oriented assumptions of current policy, and to other contributions to the debate within academia which have drawn on the cosmopolitan tradition of global justice.

Paper: This paper aims to explore the ethics of international student recruitment in the UK from the perspective of pluralist internationalism, which represents one contribution to what Wollner (2013) describes as an emergent “third wave” of theorising global justice. The question of what “we” (as citizens of the same country) owe to individuals from other countries has, broadly speaking, been considered through one of two lenses, referred to in this paper as “statism” and “cosmopolitanism”. Pluralist internationalism (Risse, 2012) sets out a substantive alternative that lies between these two, making the case for multiple “grounds of justice” with different scopes. What this means in practice is that citizens have particular rights and moral duties resulting from their shared membership of state, but that there are also other obligations of justice that apply to all human beings, regardless of nationality, due to for example our common humanity and our shared membership of a global order. Overall, when this normative framework is applied to the case of international student mobility, there are two main strands to the argument with regard to the current ‘neoliberal’ model of international student recruitment. The first is that charging differential fees is unjust because international students can be described as members of the state where they reside, but the second is that attracting large numbers of students from low- and middle-income countries is not necessarily a desirable outcome because doing so is widely understood to perpetuate existing global inequalities.

The conclusion of the first strand is seemingly similar to that of cosmopolitan theorists, but the reasoning differs. Whereas from a cosmopolitan perspective, the principle of equality of educational opportunity should be extended internationally because the same grounds for making social justice claims nationally exist internationally, from this perspective, a citizen of another state would not necessarily be entitled to the “societal resources” of the UK or any other state (Risse, 2016). However, Risse argues that shared membership of the state is normatively different, and creates relatively strong demands of justice because of nonvoluntary compliance with social rules (e.g. Nagel, 2005), or co-citizens collective participation in a system of social cooperation (e.g. Sangiovanni, 2007). The question with regard to international students is therefore, are they ‘members’ of the state in which they reside for study purposes? An argument can be made that they are. International students become subject to the host state’s authority once they become residents, which means that they are largely subject to the same forms of coercion and cooperation (reciprocity) as citizens, and therefore should be also subject to the same far-reaching principles of justice that dictate the allocation of the goods generated under the same conditions. In terms of coercion, it is clear that international students are subject to the same legal system and public bureaucracies as citizens. They may also pay income tax and make national insurance contributions if they are employed whilst studying.

However, other grounds of justice that apply more broadly than shared membership of a state mean that the UK and its higher education institutions have moral duties which extend beyond the state. Rather than suggesting that all should have equal access to the societal resources of the UK, pluralist internationalism claims that every agent and institution has a duty to ‘do what it can, within limits, to bring about the necessary conditions of just distributions, as described in the principles of justice’ (Risse, 2017, p. 48). The full paper is concerned with exploring a number of means through which governments and higher education institutions could move towards fulfilling the duty of assistance through international student recruitment, but there are pitfalls associated with each one, and these suggestions would require at least some shift away from the current paradigm in which students are seen primarily as a source of income. It should also be noted that the duty of assistance is a general principle, and not limited to specific measures related to international education. I argue that it is more likely that enhancing access to UK higher education for students from the countries for which the duty of assistance is strongest would have negative implications for the development of domestic institutions in the countries at the bottom of the global economic and political order, and would therefore be an ineffective measure in reducing global injustice.

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