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Intersecting inequalities and transnational biographies of international students from China, Indonesia, Thailand, and Tanzania

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

The paper draws on several sets of in-depth interviews to explore the expectations associated with and the actual outcomes of educational mobility of Chinese (20), Indonesian (24), Thai (12), Tanzanian (16) postgraduate's international students who return from the UK to their home countries. The longitudinal empirical design included biographical interviews and multi-sited ethnography. The theoretical framework focuses the transitions and trajectories in life course, which are combined with a perspective on intersecting inequalities such as gender, age, place of origin and social class. It considers how social identities related to gender, age and family background influence the individual educational mobility and its professional and social outcomes upon return. It pays particular attention to the role of institutions, such as universities or the state, in facilitating or restricting staff and student international mobility.

Full paper

The paper explores the effects of highly skilled mobility of graduate students from postcolonial spaces to the UK and back to their home countries. The longitudinal empirical design included biographical interviews and multi-sited ethnography. The theoretical framework

focuses the transitions and trajectories in life course, which are combined with a perspective on intersecting inequalities such as gender, age, place of origin and social class. It considers how social identities related to gender, age and family background influence the individual educational mobility and its professional and social outcomes upon return. It pays particular attention to the role of institutions, such as universities or the state, in facilitating or restricting staff and student international mobility.

Research background

International student mobility is often framed in terms of an individual's strategies and narratives (Baas, 2019), which, as Robertson (2013: 23) rightly noticed, ignores the fact that students often have dependent families and familial strategies behind them. Many students, particularly those undertaking education at the postgraduate level, have spouses and children. Whether family accompany them during their study, or they maintain transnational family relations has profound influence on the ways in which they experience their mobility. The focus on transnational relations is important because it emphasises the manner, in which the mobilities of students are generated not only by the growing globalisation of education, but also the practices of both proximate and distant social relations. Scholars are calling attention to the role of the state in transnational processes and experiences of international student mobility (Riaño, Van Mol & Raghuram, 2018), however the question of how family and personal relationships impact the decision of women and men to study abroad and their differentiated experiences of mobility as well as the outcomes of their mobilities still needs to be addressed. Only limited research specifically adopted a gender and family approach to study international student mobility (Geddie 2013; Moskal 2020; Raghuram & Sondhi, 2021; Sondhi & King 2017) to suggest that the determinants, experiences of educational migration and post-study transitions might be different for men and women in various countries and regions of the world.

Method and Data

The paper draws on several sets of in-depth interviews to explore the expectations associated with and the actual outcomes of educational mobility of Chinese (20), Indonesian (24), Thai (12), Tanzanian (16) postgraduate's international students who return from the UK to their home countries. Therefore, the sample is constituted by a highly mobile and heterogeneous group of graduates. Most of the participants completed higher education within the STEM and business studies.

The analysis demonstrates how and where gender, age, and family matter in the mobile student trajectories — from decision-making about mobility, to the experience aboard and finally the return. The analysis points to the financial resources, social capital and legal entitlements that are critical for engaging in international student mobility and return movements. While gender and age may underpin significantly diverse experiences of students at university, not all students have the same goals, needs, recourses, support, or time. Such diversity may have implications for the university policy sector and for student engagement (Gill, Hayes and Senior 2015) to challenge and eliminate structural and normalised gender and age bias.

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