

216 A conceptual exploration of universities as migration intermediaries

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Migration intermediaries are individuals, groups, and institutions that connect international migrants with their destination country. Research on intermediaries typically focuses on recruitment agencies, migration brokers, network and community groups, employers, and travel agents, among others. Together, migration intermediaries are a powerful force in guiding and sustaining international migration flows. Recently, scholars have begun to examine universities as intermediaries. Universities host a growing and diversifying international community, and frequently act as the legal sponsor for the visas of students, faculty and dependents from overseas. In some contexts, universities are drivers of migration flows, powerful attractors of migrant communities. Simultaneously, universities may be deputised by the state and, as a consequence, become institutions of migration control. This paper expands discussion of universities' intermediary roles in international migration by situating universities within a broader web of intermediaries, and interrogating their contradictory contributions to enabling and controlling migrant flows.

Full paper

This conceptual paper seeks to explore how and to what effect universities have become migration intermediaries. Migration intermediaries, defined as "agents that intervene at various critical junctures to connect the migrant to the destination country" (van den Broek et al., 2016, p. 524), are recognized as critical actors in international migration flows. A large body of literature has investigated the different individuals, groups and institutions that perform intermediary roles in migration around the world. Jones and Sha (2020) list "money lenders, recruitment agencies and individual brokers, transportation providers, travel agents, coyotes, contractors, lawyers, legal and advisory firms, formal and informal remittance, courier service owners" as typical examples of migration intermediaries that have been identified in a range of contexts. Their impact on global migration flows should not to be underestimated. On the one hand, intermediaries provide services and support that can enable and/or facilitate migration. Key examples include visa brokerage, job-hunting support, connection to public services, and information provision (Jones & Sha, 2020). On the other hand, evidence suggests that intermediaries increasingly control access to international migration in particular context. In some cases, lacking access to the appropriate intermediaries can make migration journeys impossible or dangerous. In others, migration intermediaries are active agents of state control and seek to restrict mobility (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021). Viewed holistically, the facilitating and controlling roles of migration intermediaries mediate who is able to migrate, where they are likely to migrate to, and the safety and security of those undertaking these migration journeys (Harvey, 2023).

Within this context, it is notable that, notwithstanding some outstanding exceptions, universities have not yet come under considered scrutiny with regard to their roles as migration intermediaries (Baas, 2019; Cranston et al., 2017; Tran et al., 2022). Research in both the higher education and migration studies fields has increasingly considered the intersection of universities and migration, often termed the "education-migration nexus." Such research has often used internationalization or transnationalism as a lens to approach this issue, identifying the synergies between states and universities' desires to internationalize with individuals' desires to improve their prospects through international education. The results of these synergies are evident in the enormous growth in international student and faculty mobility in recent decades.

However, there may be several considerable upsides to further investigating universities' intermediary roles. First, it would broaden discussion regarding the education-migration nexus within universities to consider alternative forms of international migrants sponsored by our higher education institutions. International faculty members and their dependents are increasingly seen on campuses across the world, but their migration statuses and the role of universities in enabling and maintaining these statuses are rarely the focus of scholarly attention. Second, it would contribute to the growing but insufficient body of research focusing on international student support in universities.

Further attention here stands to provide necessary evidence to guide improvements in offering support services tailored to the diverse needs of the international student community. Third, it would help us to interrogate the ways in which universities are being deputised by state actors, and used to further stratify and control migration processes.

In this vein, this paper reviews the literature on migration intermediaries and seeks to locate universities within the broader network of intermediary individuals, groups, and institutions. This will form the basis for future research on the specific intermediary roles of universities, and how different stakeholders in these migration flows—national and local government, universities, local communities, and critically migrants themselves—understand the role of universities as intermediaries in migration flows.

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