

## **Pandemic, Politics and Mobility Justice: International Student Mobility in Israel, China, and the United Arab Emirates**

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### **Research Domains**

Higher Education policy (HEP)

### **Abstract**

We critically analyze the politicization of international student mobility (ISM) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on Israel, China, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). We argue that the pandemic has magnified the inherent political dimensions of ISM, challenging the depoliticized, economically-driven narratives that have dominated the discourse since the 1990s. Drawing on Squire's 'politicizing mobility' we reveal how national responses to the pandemic have intersected with pre-existing political tensions and social inequalities, thereby reshaping the landscape of ISM. Through our analysis, we aim to deepen the understanding of how ISM becomes a site of political contestation, particularly in times of global crises, and its implications for mobility justice.

### **Full paper**

Despite the inherently political history of international student mobility (ISM), which has been marked by the Cold War and the battle for 'hearts and minds' between the Soviet Bloc and the West, institutions and states have increasingly depicted ISM as a largely depoliticized activity since the onset of globalization in the 1990s, prioritizing economic prospects over political considerations. (Bamberger & Morris, 2023). However, recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the surge of nationalism and populism (Brøgger, 2023), along with escalating geopolitical tensions (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023), has brought the politics of international student mobility to the fore. This has revealed the importance of the role of the state in mediating mobility, and a series of darker narratives, such as heightened tensions on campuses, the proliferation of xenophobic rhetoric and practices, including instances of racism (Agyenim-Boateng & Watson, 2023; Mok & Zhang, 2021), and the introduction of increasingly restrictive bans and quotas. These shifts prompt the need for a deeper understanding of the complexities in how politics interact with international higher education, and its implications on mobility justice.

Existing research on the impact of COVID-19 on ISM tends to focus on crisis management at the institutional level (e.g. Cordova et al., 2021), experiences of marginalized students (Koo, Yao & Gong, 2021; Mbous et al., 2022), and the growth of new forms of mobility such as virtual and 'at a distance' internationalization (Bruhn-Zass, 2021; Woicolesco et al., 2022). While these studies raise concerns

around issues of (in)equality and social justice for international students during the pandemic, from a policy perspective, rather less is known about the responses of countries with ISM recruitment policies in place during COVID-19. The adaptation or hindrance of these policies in response to pandemic politics, which have raised concerns about equity and social justice, particularly warrants critical examination. The few studies which address policy perspectives, emanating predominantly from the established Anglo-European international student destinations, indicate that the pandemic shifted policies and raised considerable ethical issues (Brunner, 2022; Matsumoto & Viczko, 2023). Importantly, rather less is known about how ISM is politicized during crises, particularly in newly emerging international student destinations, and how this politicization impacts on international student policies, shaping (in)equalities.

This study aims to address this gap by employing Squire's (2010) approach to 'politicizing mobility.' This approach offers a fresh lens to analyze the ways in which international student mobility becomes politicized and the implications for social justice. By adopting a multiple case study approach (Stake, 2013) of Israel, China, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – we explore how ISM was politicized and redefined in three nation-states situated outside the traditional Global North international student recruitment destinations, which had national policies and programs in place to promote ISM at the time of the pandemic (Bamberger & Kim, 2022; Gao & de Wit, 2017; Johnson, 2020). This study is important for two reasons: first, it can foster understanding of the political processes at play which shape ISM policies, providing explanation for particular patterns of inclusion and exclusion; and second, it can provide insights into the resilience and adaptability of international education policies in the face of global crises, informing future policies and strategies to uphold social justice amidst challenges.

We draw on a corpus of publicly available national internationalization policies, related regulations and policy reports, press releases, elite interviews (Israel case) and news articles of each country released prior to, during, and after the pandemic. We reveal how national responses to the pandemic have intersected with pre-existing political tensions and social inequalities, thereby reshaping ISM. In Israel, we argue that the pandemic has magnified deep divisions over the character and priorities of the state, highlighting the ways in which international students are implicated in struggles over national identity. In China, we contend that the state's approach to ISM during the pandemic reflects broader political strategies aimed at reinforcing party-state control and geopolitical ties, raising critical questions about how both domestic and international students' mobility is tied into the state's soft power objectives. In the UAE, we critique the dual-track higher education system's response to the pandemic, emphasizing the precarious situation of 'permanently temporary' expatriate students and the systemic inequalities within the ISM framework. Through our analysis of the Israeli, Chinese and UAE cases we reveal that ISM is inherently political, influenced by national policies, geopolitical tensions, and societal values. The pandemic has not only exposed but also intensified these political dynamics, challenging the international education community to rethink the frameworks and narratives that have traditionally guided ISM.

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