

'Dreams' and 'escapes': making sense of the UK and Portugal as study destinations for 'Global South' students

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

The narrative of those engaging with international student mobility (ISM) as being part of an elite transnational group has been challenged with students from a wider set of demographic backgrounds accessing higher education (HE). However, the concern remains that higher education students with less economic, cultural and social resources have a 'more brittle horizon of aspiration' (Appadurai, 2004 : 69 in Sellar & Gale, 2011: 125). This paper unpacks the HE destination choices of those from the 'Global South' studying in the UK (n.13) and Portugal (n.7) through conducting life story interviews, with the themes of 'dreams' and 'escapes' emerging. The final stage of analysis led to the creation of composite vignettes. The findings suggest that moving beyond individual demographic characteristics to wider socio-cultural factors which may be shaping ISM decisions should be understood in order to fully make sense of individual aspirations.

Full paper

Context

Increasingly the international student mobility (ISM) research has highlighted that there is heterogeneity in the 'international student experience' which is both multi-dimensional and stratified (Glass *et al.*, 2022; Ploner, 2017; Schartner & Shields, 2023) with an increasing number of higher education (HE) learners coming from a wider range of geographical locations and a broader spectrum of socio-economic positions (Deuchar, 2022). The focus on individual factors such as socio-economic status and gender (Shields & Schartner, 2024; Schartner, Shields & Wang, 2024) has led us to often consider individual aspirations for ISM

without always including broader analysis of the wider socio-cultural context in which the decision to study abroad is made.

Methodology and research design

This paper is part of a larger explanatory-sequential mixed methods study (Shields *et al.*, 2024) which has considered the experiences of 'Global South' students choosing three different countries as their Higher Education destination (Kazakhstan, Portugal, UK). The study included a questionnaire (n. 338) and interviews (n. 28) in total. This paper focuses on the twenty online Zoom life story interviews conducted with participants studying in the UK and Portugal by two trained facilitators. For the students studying in the UK, the interviews were conducted in English (given that the students were studying in English-medium institutions and had good command of the language). The interviews with the students studying in Portugal were conducted in Portuguese with a native of Angola who was also fluent in English. The interviews followed a life-history structure and narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) was undertaken. Composite vignettes were created in the final stage of the analysis. Composite vignettes enable the experiences of several participants to be amalgamated into a single narrative enabling specific themes to be extrapolated (Blodgett *et al.*, 2011). Ethical approval was sought from the lead institution and pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Findings

The findings add thought-provoking insights into our understandings of ISM – highlighting the significance of societal politics and societal cultures in shaping aspirations of mobility. The political situation in a number of countries had led participants to believe that it would be difficult to achieve their dreams if they stayed in their home country to study. Furthermore, for a number of participants the UK and Portugal were deemed to be places which would offer greater levels of personal safety. However, the need to 'escape' from certain environments was often balanced with a strong interest in levels of homogeneity in the study destination, in relation to established communities which had connections or similarities to their home country. For some participants the desire for familiarity was tempered with curiosity about travel and a desire to experience new cultures. Overall, the participants imagined a future in which their educational qualifications would lead to secure, fulfilling career opportunities and a greater level of financial stability. The imagination of participants could only reach so far into the future, and they remained flexible about the longer term - holding multiple possibilities in their heads. This flexibility reflected the wider socio-cultural context as the participants

acknowledged uncertainty in local and global politics and what this might mean for their choice of country in which they would eventually settle. The findings suggest that aspiration remains an important theoretical lens through which to analyse the experiences of those engaged in ISM, however, it should be noted that for those with less 'resources' and 'capitals', it is likely that these higher education learners will have a 'more brittle horizon of aspiration' (Appadurai, 2004: 69 in Sellar & Gale, 2011: 125) in addition to this being shaped by the wider socio-cultural context, as local and global politics influenced decision making in relation to ISM.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper can only shed light on the broader complexity of ISM decision making in relation to the wider socio-cultural contexts of participants choosing to study in the UK or Portugal. However, this paper indicates that further mapping of the wider socio-cultural contexts of countries of origin and study destination would be worth further exploration in order to make sense of the migratory experiences of (im)mobilities as international students imagine alternative futures. The paper recommends that wider socio-cultural factors inform future analyses of individual ISM aspirations.