

Policy constructions of online overseas students in Canada, France and the UK

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

The proposed paper reports on the first phase of the VIRMOBS project, an international comparative project examining the virtual mobilities of international students to Canada, France and the UK. Drawing on an analysis of reports and legal documents (c. 300) and following a sociohistorical methodology, the paper examines key trends and influences in the development of national policies underpinning and framing online programmes aimed at overseas students. It highlights in particular the differentiated role of marketization and immigration control across the three countries, as well as contracted conceptualisations and policy constructions of the population under study.

(Also relevant to strands HEP and DU)

Full paper

International students have long been the object of policy debates. Their construction in political and media discourses has shifted constantly across time and space (Ballatore et al., 2024; Levantino et al., 2018), following, among other influences, changes in the policy construction of other migrant groups (Borgogno and Streiff-Fenart, 1996). Processes of differentiation have also taken place, separating those from given regions (e.g. the EU) from others (Carpentier and Courtois, 2022). These shifts have in turn legitimised differentiated fee regimes and access to rights and protection. So far limited scholarly attention has been paid to an emerging category of international students, those enrolled in distance online HE programmes (hereafter 'online overseas students').

The VIRMOBS project (Virtual mobilities of international students) is an international, comparative project funded by the ANR, ESRC, and SSHRC under the ORA programme. It examines the dynamics underlying the virtual mobilities of online overseas students enrolled in the UK, France, and Canada.

In this paper, we report on the first phase of the project. This phase focuses on analysing the institutional dynamics and policy choices underlying the development of virtual mobilities within and between Canada, France and the UK. We ask: How did different historical and contemporary policy approaches to the internationalisation of HE, migration, and online teaching technologies, shape virtual mobility in the three countries? What role did forces such as marketization, anti-immigration discourses, the COVID-9 crisis and environmental challenges play in shaping the current policy approach to this phenomenon across our case-study countries?

We utilise a sociohistorical methodology (Dubois, 2003; Zimmerman, 2015) to explore documentary sources (legal documents, parliamentary reports, reports from various sector bodies) in the three countries over the last twenty years to understand the social and political dynamics underpinning the development of virtual mobilities.

The collection and analysis of documentary material began in April 2025, and we estimate that by September, 100 relevant documents will have been examined in each country. Our preliminary findings point to the following dimensions:

Contrasted approaches to international student recruitment. The UK implemented differentiated fees for international students in the 1980s and is currently the most marketized system. French policy followed European policies, themselves inspired by UK policies. Thus, France followed a logic of soft power until the 2000s and applied differentiated fees for non-EU students only in 2020, with a renewed emphasis on selective immigration principles and labour market adjustment. Canada occupies an intermediate position. Differentiated tuition fees were implemented in the 1970s but with variations between provinces and territories, institutions, and study programmes. The federal government allocates significant resources to support international student recruitment to promote the diversification of the education sector, enhance Canada's innovation capacity, cultivate global connections, and stimulate economic growth (Global Affairs Canada, 2019).

Different constructions of online overseas students. In the UK: overseas students studying online are defined in market terms and separated from other international students, under the 'transnational education' label which designates all those 'based wholly offshore'. In this perspective, online overseas students are defined by their immobility and lumped together with those studying at offshore branch campuses. They are framed as a profitable alternative to incoming physical mobility, while also serving as a pipeline for international student recruitment. They typically pay high fees, but their programmes are not always

covered by sectoral regulations. In France, distance education programmes have historically been underdeveloped, catering for a national rather than an international audience. Significantly, online overseas students do not appear in statistics as a distinct category. Physical incoming mobility is what matters, signalling France's cultural influence. Recent policies suggest a shift towards a commercial approach that specifically problematises African students, whose presence on French soil is increasingly being challenged (see Roos Breines, 2019). France's ambition to develop a distance learning offer seems primarily directed at them, notably through French-speaking digital campuses across Africa. In Canada, similarly, online overseas students are not delineated as a discrete category in statistical compilations. Government entities do not possess data concerning this demographic, as distance learning does not require a study permit (Global Affairs Canada, 2024). The reception and recruitment of this seemingly new category of students appear to be managed primarily by educational institutions, with a conspicuous absence of a comprehensive strategy. Online overseas students are currently exempt from international fees in both France and Canada.

The paper contributes to emergent debates on the transformations of higher education internationalisation in the digital age and how a specific category of international students is constructed through policy (Brooks and Water, 2022; Li et al., 2021; Mittelmeir, 2021).