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# REFLECTION ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY IN EUROPE FROM A MIGRATION STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

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Realities and Recommendations

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*This brief provides a report of international student mobility (ISM) in Europe and policy recommendations for European higher education institutions. It is based on part of a master's thesis – “The (Im)mobilities of Global Professionals’: Social Mobility Projects of International Scholarship Students in Sweden” by Jocelyn Brown – which was written for the EuMIGS Double Degree Programme in 2025.*

## **WHO IS AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT (IN EUROPE)?**

There are many different types of student mobility within Europe, and not every student understands and defines their mobility experiences the same way. In most EU countries, a distinction is made between international students from another EU member state and students from outside of Europe. Some European students who study outside their country of birth may be considered as international students, such as Erasmus students. In contrast to European students studying in another European country, international students from outside of Europe studying in Europe differ in at least two ways: 1) they need a visa and residence permit to study and 2) they face much higher tuition fees at the HEI than European students.

## **WHAT ARE THE TRENDS IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY (ISM) IN EUROPE?**

Student migration is on the rise, undertaken for both short-term cultural experiences and long-term migration considerations. Over the past two decades, international students have become one of the fastest growing migrant groups in the world. In 2021, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that 4.3 million international students enrolled in higher education institutions in OECD countries, of whom 49% were in

European countries (2023, 34). Estimates of student mobility that also include Erasmus students, or other similar short-term exchanges, would be even higher. The previous frontrunners in receiving international students were the United Kingdom and United States. However, with their recent political turmoil and restrictions on ISM, they are falling as competitive study destinations. Now, European countries are on the rise, hosting more international students than ever before. Targeted recruitment, scholarships, offering more bachelor or master's programmes in English, and double degree programmes such as EuMIGS and Erasmus Mundus are also encouraging more ISM within Europe.

## **WHY DO STUDENTS CHOOSE TO STUDY INTERNATIONALLY IN EUROPE?**

Scholar Per Nilsson (2015) writes, "By choosing to study abroad, students take a significant step in setting in motion their own individual life projects" (162). Not only do international students become physically mobile by studying abroad, they also experience an increase in social mobility by developing certain skills and making connections. In general, education abroad has been associated with an increase in economic capital and intercultural competencies. It also increases unexpected but related skills, such as creativity and resiliency (Gerhards & Hans 2013). Studying far away from home, working and budgeting in a foreign currency, and making new friends from scratch is sure to test a person's resolve in ways that are hopefully more rewarding than not.

Most scholars utilize classic push-pull models to analyze student migration decision-making (Bodycott 2009; Li 2018). For example, a push factor would be the absence of their desired educational program in their home country, and a pull factor could be the desire for new cultural experiences. Some push-pull factors are instrumental, relating to the host country and home country; some are intrinsic, relating to the students' inner worlds and desires (Aghaee Khaledi 2024). For example, students may be pulled to pursue an international career due to better salaries abroad, or they may be pushed to return home from

mobility restrictions or personal feelings and obligations. It is important to note that migration studies criticizes push-pull models as being simplistic, as they do not capture the complexity of human relations and choices. ISM decisions are a complex web of practical and personal desires, such as familial considerations, weather preferences, and even stumbling upon programs randomly. International students have many different pathways to their destination, finding themselves in European countries and HEIs they had not even known about a year prior.

But why Europe, in particular? Europe is extremely expensive for internationals and perhaps not the friendliest host, with many countries embroiled in immigration debates already. However, Europe also has many historic, internationally regarded HEIs. The key is the degree mobility obtained through these HEIs and programmes. Degree mobility, or obtaining a degree abroad, is likely to lead to better job opportunities back home or more international job opportunities (Nilsson 2015, 163). Tertiary degrees from OECD states and institutions carry more degree mobility globally, as they are seen as more exclusive and easily verifiable. This gap in degree mobility is a structural problem of underdevelopment of the Global South. Highly qualified professionals in the Global South feel the need to receive a degree from the Global North to be taken seriously, whether they want to migrate permanently or have access to a global career. Again, while ISM decisions are not easily quantifiable, degree mobility and the international validity of European HEIs remains a significant deciding factor.

## **HOW CAN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS SUPPORT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS?**

Based on the realities of international students in Europe, here are some recommendations for HEIs interested in furthering, maintaining, and protecting their international student populations, as well as promoting student mobility as a whole. Helping one group usually helps everyone, so implementing

these recommendations also improves the education of other mobile students – and even non-mobile students!

## **SUPPORT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS BEFORE AND AFTER GRADUATION**

International students do not know what waits for them after graduation, since they are facing “circumstances that are ex-ante unknown and ex-post not fully under the control of the individuals who migrate” (Aghaee Khaledi 2024, 8). Song & Kim (2022) write of the “school-to-work transition as a major life event in the interplay between individual agency and social structure,” where international students often have a more difficult time during this transition than domestic students due to structural barriers and a lack of resources (574). If their goal is to stay in the country of study, international students become ‘just another migrant,’ facing many roadblocks to employment. Thus, HEIs can prepare students before graduating by providing career counseling and networking opportunities, such as job fairs with local companies and organizations. They can also promote alumni networks or mentoring opportunities, as even international students who move away would likely love to stay in touch with their institution.

## **EXPOSE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO LOCAL POPULATIONS**

International students may be unsure where to start to make connections, and the host country may implicitly or explicitly discourage them from making any connections. Malette & Ismailzai (2020) measure bridging capital, a type of social capital that operates as “networks that span interpersonal social divisions,” as key to helping Asian international students in Canada make impactful personal and professional networks (73). Therefore, HEIs should do

their best to integrate international students with domestic students for social opportunities, such as buddy programmes and orientation weeks. They can also integrate them into the campus and town/city by providing cultural excursions or volunteer opportunities.

## **RECOGNIZE THAT ISM IS BECOMING UNPOPULAR – PROTECT YOUR STUDENTS POLITICALLY**

That being said, student migration is also one of the first mobilities that states curtail under times of duress or conservative administrations. In Europe, one can point to students' rapidly shifting realities post-Brexit or the Dutch student housing crisis, amongst others. Overall, due to their competition with domestic students, international student mobility is seen as “simultaneously a threat and an opportunity” for host countries (Levatino 2018, 377). Some of these concerns, such as the Dutch housing crisis, also affect European students. EuMIGS students also shared concerns with university bureaucracy, housing, cost of living, and conflicting feelings about where to live and what to do post-graduation. These concerns, such as “Where am I going to live next semester?”, obviously impact students' ability to show up authentically in the classroom. Be prepared to support students in whatever way possible, even if it's just listening. HEIs can also prepare pre-arrival guides for international students that document common bureaucratic processes, potential difficulties, common cultural differences, and more.

## **HAVE ACTIVE AND SUPPORTIVE INTERNATIONAL OFFICES**

Most European HEIs have smaller international offices with quite limited capacity, compared to other study destinations such as American HEIs. It is not common to provide pre-arrival guidance or student visa documentation

guidance. However, since international students are paying customers of the institution and facing increased political scrutiny, international offices should be prepared to be more proactive and supportive of international student questions and concerns. This is especially true of institutions participating in European double degree Erasmus Mundus programmes, where students have to move between two and four times during their degree. For non-EU international students participating in these programmes, a phenomenon that is increasing, this means getting multiple visas. While international students understand that they are responsible for the majority of their journey and documentation, HEIs should be able to meet the demands of international students with diversified staff support and up-to-date knowledge.

Overall, international student mobility is a lifeline and the driving force behind the internationalization of European higher education, providing diversity, funding, and a global exchange of knowledge, amongst other benefits. As populations shrink and industries shift, some programmes, and even some HEIs as a whole, would cease to exist without the numbers and resources provided by international students in Europe. Therefore, examining ISM within migration students and supporting international students in practice is more important now than ever.

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