

Careers on the Move: International Doctoral Students at an Elite British University

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ABSTRACT

International student mobility, especially at doctoral level, is a largely under-researched component of international migration. This is in stark contrast with the case of credit mobility where much research has been undertaken on Erasmus students. The aim of this paper is to remedy the situation by focusing on international doctoral students who chose to study at an elite higher education institution in the UK. By analysing the role of – local, national and international – schemes of funding in shaping individual mobility decisions, the author argues against the portrayal of international students as ‘rational decision makers’ in favour of a more contextualised approach to mapping the graduate student migratory phenomenon. By contrasting the ‘entry channels’ of students with their future plans – in terms of the nature of future career and geographic location – the author challenges the assumption that internationally mobile students are coming with the intention of settling down in their study destination. The study cannot uphold the view of international students as a ‘migratory elite’ either; although some postgraduate students are indeed from more privileged backgrounds, many individuals undertake international doctoral mobility with the explicit aim of capital accumulation. Last but not least, the paper strongly argues for abandoning the term ‘spontaneous mobility’ in student mobility research because a significant proportion of degree mobility does not occur spontaneously but is a result of organised schemes of funding.

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INTRODUCTION

Even though the UK comes second (after the USA) in the global list of receiving countries for foreign students with 370,000 students representing 15% of the student population in the UK (HESA statistics cited in King *et al.*, 2010), the scholarship on international migration pays a scant attention to students as migrants or mobile people (King *et al.*, 2010; King & Raghuram, 2013). Except the growing research on Erasmus students, also referred to as ‘institutional’ or *credit mobility* (see e.g. Murphy-Lejeune, 2004; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2013), and the recent influx of publications on the motivations and experiences of UK students studying abroad (see e.g. Brooks & Waters, 2009; Findlay *et al.*, 2010; King *et al.*, 2011), research is still scarce on internationally mobile graduate students who pursue their education in the UK.

Since international student mobility ‘has not found a conceptual or methodological home’ (Kehm & Teichler, 2007: 263) being situated on the crossroads of migration studies, sociology, education, linguistics and geography, researchers of international student mobility (hereafter ISM) followed several different lines of inquiry (King & Raghuram, 2013). Whereas some (e.g. Findlay *et al.*, 2012) approached the topic from the migration perspective, others relied on seeing ISM in light of the internationalisation of higher education (Brooks & Waters, 2011) or examined pedagogical questions (Coates, 2009). Most research, however, focused on international student mobility from the individual perspective and neglected the role of structural

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forces in shaping individual choices. In response to this, Findlay (2011) recently argued in favour of supply-demand side theorisations, believing that ISM should not be simply reduced to individual decisions or mechanisms of social class reproduction.

Because current scholarship continues to refer to degree mobility as 'spontaneous', involving an individual's decision to study abroad for the length of a degree, it ignores the significant role the macro-context plays in shaping access to international mobility opportunities. Thus, by identifying the sources of funding (i.e. international, governmental, local or university-based scholarships and bursaries) as key determinants in access to doctoral studies in a foreign country, this paper offers a new, more contextualised approach to the study of degree mobility.

Although most of this research deals with – local, national and international – schemes of funding determining the individuals' chances for pursuing (funded) degree mobility at an elite British university, it also proposes to uncover who these mobile students are, how they end up at an elite university abroad and what are their intentions once they complete the PhD. Thus, instead of focusing solely on individual decision-making at a given point in time, the paper offers a more processual perspective on incoming doctoral student mobility. In doing so, it challenges current debates on internationally mobile students being part of a migratory 'elite' and argues against the portrayal of ISM in terms of 'individual' choice, because schemes of funding put in place in many countries clearly play a role in shaping access to international educational opportunities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Student Mobility: A Class Affair?

As higher education (HE) becomes the UK's fifth largest service export, the British HE sector is experiencing a massive growth. Only in 2008/09 international students collectively added £9.6bn to the UK economy (Grove, 2012). British universities educate about 2.5 million students annually, and the number of foreign students at UK universities has more than doubled in the past decade. As most international students target postgraduate degrees, full-time postgraduate numbers have increased by 73% since 2000. Overall, international students from outside the EU now account for

12% of all students at UK institutions, compared with just 6.5% in 2000 (Patterns and Trends in UK Higher Education, 2011).

The growing inflow of international students is a clear indicator of a global HE market where higher education institutions are competing directly with each other to attract students and the money they bring with them. Following the reduction in public sector expenditure in many developed countries – including the UK HE sector – international students are starting to be seen as an object of trade and a source of revenue, referred to as 'cash cows'. But are there any consequences to such a market-driven higher education?

Underprivileged students, for example, students of ethnic or lower social class background, often referred to as 'non-traditional' students, continue to be underrepresented in many prestigious universities in spite of the rising proportion of international students at the very same institutions (see Connor *et al.*, 2004). But is it fair to say that international students are 'crowding out' potential domestic students within the British HE sector? Conversely, is it possible that international students are facing less 'selective' admissions in favour of balancing the books? Current scholarship is yet to investigate whether elite universities entered a new era of 'widening participation' or they discovered in international students a new pool of (white) middle class candidates to choose from – so they can continue acting as transmitters of privileges from generation to generation (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Existing scholarship on ISM shows clear linkages between student mobility and social class. Several studies indicate that mobile students are likely to originate from higher social strata, namely from the middle and upper classes. This applies to both credit and degree mobility (see e.g. HEFCE, 2004, 2009; Findlay *et al.*, 2006, 2010; Heublein *et al.*, 2008; Waters & Brooks, 2010; Brooks & Waters, 2011). Correspondingly, the EuroStudent 2000 confirmed that '[r]egardless of the general degree of international mobility in individual countries, students from low income families make substantially less use of the opportunities for studying abroad than those from families with higher income' (cited in Findlay *et al.*, 2006: 303). Apparently, students who move as part of the (organised) Erasmus scheme are typically coming from families with higher educated parents and an abundance of financial resources (Cammelli *et al.*, 2008). For example, having a mother in professional or managerial

employment was the strongest predictor of European mobility amongst the students surveyed in the UK (Findlay *et al.*, 2006). This clearly shows that education – perhaps even more than before – necessitates resources, thus schooling continuously intersects with social class.

Then again, researchers of degree mobility are less inclined to agree on the background of internationally mobile degree students. On one hand, previous research has pointed out that degree students are the major consumers of global rankings (King *et al.*, 2010), sensitive to the status of universities, they are increasingly coming from families where Harvard and Oxford are household names, thus representing a social segment that is relatively wealthy, with good foreign language skills, a high degree of familial support, and a history of international mobility (Favell, 2008; Waters, 2008). Such families are more likely to exercise choice (Ball, 2003) and approach education strategically, often concerned with ‘employability’ objectives (Brown, 1990; Baláž & Williams, 2004; Findlay *et al.*, 2006; Waters, 2006). Here, preference for particular countries often relates to the pursuit of ‘reputational capital’, that is, the desire to attend the most prestigious institutions in the global rankings. The key aim is to secure a ‘positional advantage’ within a saturated graduate labour market (Waters, 2006, 2009; Brown, 2000) through the acquisition of international credentials from institutions such as Oxbridge or the Ivy League (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Brown & Lauder, 2006).

The latter is the strategy applied against degree deflation by many middle class families (Ball *et al.*, 2002), who countered their ‘fear of falling’ by targeting prestigious institutions overseas. Here, socio-spatial mobility is a mechanism ‘through which the middle class seeks to reproduce itself and to ‘keep ahead’ of the *embourgeoisement* of lower-class groups’ (Findlay *et al.*, 2006: 294; italic in original). Studying British students, Brooks and Waters (2009) maintain that middle class students failing to secure a place at Oxbridge get their ‘second chance at success’ by pursuing elite education overseas, rather than enrolling at what they perceived to be a ‘lesser British university’.

But others argue that student mobility may explicitly appeal to lower-middle class individuals (Recchi, 2006), who could see it as an ‘investment’ and use it as a shortcut to capital accumulation on the way to securing their future (Bourdieu, 1986).

In line with Bourdieu’s notion of capital (King *et al.*, 2010) students who study in an international arena are able to accumulate multiple and mutually-reinforcing forms of capital, amongst others, ‘mobility capital (cf. Murphy-Lejeune, 2004), human capital (a world-class university education), social capital (access to networks, “connections”), cultural capital (languages, intercultural awareness) and, eventually, economic capital (high-salary employment)’ (King *et al.*, 2010: 32). As a result, degree mobility may play a role ‘both in maintaining status, for students from privileged backgrounds, and in acquiring cultural capital for students from less privileged origins’ (King *et al.*, 2013: no page).

In line with the text mentioned earlier, the aim of the paper is to study the socio-economic and educational background of international doctoral students at an elite university in order to identify if they are ‘the bearers of privilege and class reproduction’ (Waters & Brooks, 2010) while being mindful of the wider structural context in which their mobility decisions are played out.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

By identifying both individual and macro-level factors that channel students towards world-class institutions, the paper aims to contextualise the graduate student migratory phenomenon. Methodologically, it will do so by relying on in-depth interviews carried out with current doctoral students and recent PhDs at a prestigious, college-based, English research university, which is considered one of the oldest universities in the world. In the following, I will be referring to the institution by the pseudonym ‘Elite’ in order to ensure my interviewees’ confidentiality.

Elite has been chosen due to it being a world-class university attracting the ‘best and the brightest’ nationally and internationally: 16% of undergraduates and 61% of its postgraduate students are coming from outside of the UK (i.e. 40% overseas and 21% EU). The numbers are even more striking for social sciences where the overwhelming majority of postgraduate students are from abroad (78% compared with only 21% at undergraduate level). Overall, postgraduate students make up around 44% of the total student body at Elite, and the number of applications for postgraduate study now surpasses those for undergraduate courses.

While aiming to capture postgraduate student mobility, the research did not intend to focus on postgraduate students pursuing a masters degree, only the doctorate. There were several reasons for this. For example, postgraduate studies were used by many international students as springboards to a British PhD, whereas in some cases, attending a masters was set as a requirement (e.g. 1+3) before allowing a student to officially enrol into a doctoral programme. As a consequence, half of our interviewees did their masters in the UK, the majority already at Elite (first or second masters) or at another London-based institution. Because of the 'direct' progression to a PhD, I aimed to focus solely on doctoral education.

In line with this, doctoral students covering a range of nationalities and degree subjects (within social sciences and humanities) were targeted via email and asked to take part in the research. Personal networks and snowballing were used together with departmental and college mailing lists in order to reach as many respondents as possible. Overall, 20 in-depth interviews were carried out with a relatively wide spread of nationalities, which included the following countries: Italy, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Australia, USA, China and Chile. The sample was gender-balanced with equal proportion of humanities and social science students. Twenty-seven years was the average age of interviewees who were predominantly single (five married out of 20, only two had children, both male students). Although the interviewees' parents were – with few exceptions – higher educated, there was hardly any history of 'academia' in their families (fathers' education dominantly BA/MA, mothers BA).

Although trying to identify the signifiers of an internationally mobile doctoral student, the research aimed to probe the motivations, choices, educational trajectories and career plans of international PhD students relative to their social class background, gender, nationality and access to funding. Although students were asked to reconstruct their educational trajectories from start to the present, detailed questions were aimed at their prior higher education choices as well as the motivations and circumstances of the choice of Elite for doctoral studies, including the subsequent experiences of studying here. The 20 interviews ranging between 45 and 150 min were professionally transcribed and analysed in Atlas.ti. All student names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

FINDINGS

International Doctoral Students: A Migratory Elite?

Reading through the interviews, it became clear that the phrase 'migratory elite' would not necessarily represent the whole international doctoral student body. Although I expected social class to be the intervening variable, the data clearly pointed at access to funding as the critical factor splitting the international student body. Although class-based inequalities were apparent in access to specific types of funding, the present analysis offers a more nuanced and contextualised picture of international doctoral mobility.

Focusing on access to particular types of funding, the paper divides international doctoral students at Elite into four main categories: there are students who came via funding through highly competitive international scholarships, students being awarded UK research council grants or funded by their colleges, students funded by the government of their country of origin and self-paying students who cover the costs of their education individually. These diverse types of funding clearly attract students of different socio-economic backgrounds and prior educational trajectories. Contrasting the 'entry channels' of students with their future plans – represented through geographic (im)mobility and career interests in/outside of academia – probes the assumptions on international students as a migratory 'elite', whereas questioning whether student migration is undertaken for the – sole – purpose of settlement in the country of HE study.

Prestigious international scholarships

Doctoral students coming to Elite on international scholarships truly represent the 'elite' of the PGR community. Distinguished students of the USA, who display a potential to make a significant contribution to their own society, are awarded by what many public sources consider the 'world's most prestigious' scholarships for postgraduate study. Under these schemes, scholars are selected each year from an extremely competitive pool of America's top undergraduate students. Distinction of intellect and character evidenced by scholastic attainments and other achievements is awarded by prestigious scholarships covering two to three years of fully funded study. The majority of selectees go on to attend the 'best

academic programmes' in the UK: either at Oxbridge or at one of the prestigious London universities (generally referred to as the 'golden triangle').

As the description suggests, doctoral students belonging to this category tend to come from very privileged backgrounds, where education is highly valued and parental expectations are aimed at reproducing their existing privilege. Edith, who is coming from 'a family of all people with college degrees' talks very vividly about the importance of education in her own family:

I had really, really strong support from my family, [...] education has always been a priority, it's just never been conceivable, I think, to my sister and me that you could be successful without doing very well in your education. So I think that part of it is having that mentality and then part of it is having all the material support that you need to make prioritising education possible. (Edith, Humanities, US)

But getting good education requires resources, thus finance is an important factor when considering which schools to attend and whether to take on any extra-curriculars. 'That was always understood that parents would pay for college. So that's probably a big reason why we took it for granted that we were going to colleges' says Edith, who by her own admission never had to work for tuition and appreciates the kind of material privilege she was raised in: 'Not having to worry about financial stuff is super cool'.

Although putting a high value on education is not at all uncommon, it is the extent of involvement that makes the parental efforts stand out. Edith and David did not end up at Elite accidentally, they did so because their parents went above and beyond what is expected 'normally'. The commitment made in these families is evidenced by David's (Humanities, US) own admission who spoke highly of his parents and the support he received:

I know for a fact [that] my mom gave up her career as a high-time professor to be at a local state college to basically raise her kids well and to be that mom. She used to say: 'It was more important for me to raise two men'. She was more worried about the balance between

our music lessons, our sports practices, and our academics [...] so there was never any time when they said 'No, that's not possible', meaning they found a way to pay for a music lesson. They always rearranged their schedules to drive me or my brother to a soccer practice. They went to every parent teacher conference. They were the first volunteers on a field trip even though they both had full-time jobs. Their involvement was the most I have ever seen and I think that was their way of – maybe not pressuring but – saying 'Yeah, we value this.' (David, Humanities, US)

As the interview excerpts indicate, access to international scholarships is 'restricted' to a highly selected few who are versed with a wide range of capital readily available to support their educational endeavours. Although they are highly privileged to start with, their existing situation is further enhanced by becoming part of this particularly exclusive club of scholarship-holders, with all the material and social advantages it entails, thus successfully using international student mobility to maintain their privileged status or even further their existing advantage.

Governmentally funded scholarships

This group is made up of students – mostly from Latin America, Turkey and Saudi – who came to the UK to study using the governmental funding provided for overseas PGR study in their home countries (Downie, 2012b). In 2010, there were over 44,000 Turkish students studying overseas, a significant number of these coming to prestigious UK and US institutions through government funding received for studying abroad. Similarly, the scholarship program of Chile awarded 1,331 scholarships (539 for PhD) in year 2009 only, underlying the government's commitment to sending their best students to study at highly prestigious foreign universities (Downie, 2012a).

But although the nature of this scholarship appears similar to the international scholarships discussed earlier, both offering study opportunities to the most deserving students, the profile of the scholarship-holders greatly differs. Those successful in getting the US funding have a higher social profile, suggesting that the 'preparation' for these scholarships has to start early and requires the presence of vast amount of cultural, social and economic capital. On the other hand, the allocation

of governmental funding does not seem to have such an inbuilt socio-economic bias, as the more varied social class background of the interviewees indicates, many of whom came to Elite from lower-middle class or even working class backgrounds. In spite of their more humble upbringing, they show high levels of aspiration and are highly motivated to make the best of the existing opportunities.

My Mum was really ambitious, she was always pushing me; wanted me and my brother to achieve things that she couldn't achieve in her life. Even though she has a good career and she is doing fine, she always says: 'you should do much better.' (Zeynep, Social Science, Turkey)

My parents divorced when I was young, I was like the only child in my family so my mum was very strict [saying] you have to study so you have more opportunities than me, so you can go to university. (Elena, Social Science, Chile)

Studying abroad or doing a PhD does not come naturally to many of these students, it is not part of the initial career plan, rather, it 'happens' as a result of hard work and good educational achievements. The rhetoric here is about making (parental) dreams come true, but there is ambition and hard work backing up the 'once in a life-time' opportunity to study at Elite. The interviewees' life stories clearly underline the role of ISM as a vehicle of social mobility, as many of these students are first in their families to enter university or pursue postgraduate study. But although access to such scholarships allows students to pick and choose from amongst a highly selective list of world-class institutions, they also have the contractual obligation to return to their country of origin after graduation. Even though both Chilean and Turkish students have to commit themselves to returning home and working twice as many years in public service as the length of their international study, these scholarships offer a unique opportunity to get a world-class degree 'for free', which is more than their parents ever imagined.

UK-based funding (research council and/or college-based scholarships)

Looking at UK-based funding, this group consists of mostly European students who tend to do their

masters at Elite and subsequently apply for UK research council funding or gain other, often college-based scholarships to cover the costs of their doctoral studies. Their behaviour is rather strategic as they tend to use the masters as a stepping stone to the PhD at Elite, often willing to take on the financial burden of a year-long postgraduate degree in order to secure a subsequent 3-year funding for doctoral studies.

Sabine (Social Science, Germany), for example, comes to the UK to do a masters initially. Because her family is well endowed with economic capital, she is able to enrol into a private university for undergraduate studies in her home country. But in spite of coming from a comfortable middle class background, she admits: 'I think I'm like the first person in my family who goes abroad to study and not many people in my family have a degree, they're all doing more practical stuff and more creative work than scientific so [the PhD is] not what they expected I guess.' Nevertheless, she has her family's – financial as well as emotional – support for doing a masters at the LSE and subsequently secures ESRC funding to do PhD at Elite.

Similarly to Sabine, Boyka (Social Science, Romania) comes to the UK to pursue a masters at Elite. Coming from a solid middle class background, her parents place high expectations on her: 'I think my parents would have gotten a heart attack if I didn't get into university'; but being a bright and resourceful student, she successfully secures an Open University scholarship to cover the costs of her postgraduate studies at Elite. While she hesitates between moving back home or continuing her education in the UK, she is awarded funding for a PhD by her college, which in turn determines her future academic career.

Although most of these students are coming from middle class backgrounds, they often do not come with the 'full package'. For example, Sabine's well-to-do family is able to convert their economic capital into cultural and social capital by sending their daughter to LSE, which allows her to qualify for a funded place for PhD at Elite. Conversely, in the case of Boyka, the lack of economic capital is counterbalanced with cultural and social capital, which is used to access economic sources, such as funding for postgraduate studies, subsequently leading onto the doctorate. Hence, international educational opportunities, and specifically the masters, are effectively used in both cases to increase their chances for accessing fully funded doctoral studies at Elite.

Self-paying students

Self-paying students are clearly those who pursue ISM in spite of not being able to access any – local, national or international – grants or scholarships. The group is generally split between privileged students whose governments do not provide funding for overseas studies (and who do not qualify for UK funding), thus they have to rely on their own finances. Further, there are students coming from more humble backgrounds from whom studying at Elite is somewhat ‘accidental’, although they are not afraid to make sacrifices for a ‘once in a life-time’ opportunity to study at a world-class university.

Thus, it is unsurprising that some of the self-paying doctoral students echo their – more fortunate – peers who are recipients of international scholarships. Coming from stable middle class families with longstanding traditions of higher education pursuing doctoral studies is considered a ‘natural progression’ for many.

In my family, it is not a question: You definitely are going to university. I mean, we don’t have any of our generation who has not been to university. We *all* hold a degree, a university degree. University for the middle class is something that you don’t think about. It’s something that comes directly after school. It’s as if we’re talking about grade one, grade two, grade three, the progression is *normal*. (Mary, Humanities, Lebanon)

Education, here, is highly valued and supported financially. As Mary suggests, finance concerns in the sense that ‘university education is very expensive. But, to be honest, it wasn’t a concern that would stop you from going to university. It was just a concern that you have to plan your expenses.’ Thus, the lack of scholarships does not deter these students from studying at Elite as their parents do their outmost in supporting them financially, in order to maintain their existing privilege.

Next to this group of self-funders, there are students like Norma (Humanities, US), for whom the chances of being awarded a prestigious international scholarship are close to nil. Coming from a single-parent household, Norma is not well versed with capital, thus unable to compete with her more privileged peers.

For Americans, there’s really only the Marshall and the Rhodes [scholarships], and you have to be an *insanely* good student and I wasn’t. I used to think, ‘Oh maybe I’m...’ I’ve never thought I’m not smart enough, but I always thought like if I’d tried harder... But did I have the luxury to be able to do that? These people didn’t have three jobs, usually. They could get up and their only worry that day was getting to their classes. (Norma, Humanities, US)

Similar to Norma, Viola’s (Humanities, US) childhood has not been filled with a never-ending list of extra-curricular activities. Nevertheless, her mother instilled in her the value of hard work and ambition. Doing her outmost to provide for her children while juggling childcare, full-time jobs and further education, Viola’s mother leads by example when inspiring her daughter to get an education. As a result, it is no surprise that the strong parental work ethic is ‘mirrored’ by their offspring’s ambition.

My parents separated around when I was two and my mum was working full-time and she decided to go back to school to get her masters degree, so she was getting her masters, working full-time and raising a toddler by herself [...] that woman worked *so hard*, it was just like out of control. (Viola, Humanities, US)

In a similar fashion, Norma confides ‘At the end of the day the only thing that drives [is] a genuine curiosity and a willingness to work hard’. But their rhetoric about ‘hard work’ stands in strong contrast with the sense of ‘entitlement’, which characterises many of the more privileged. Working hard brings its own rewards, eventually, as new and exciting avenues open up to them, opportunities their parents could not even imagine. But in spite of the apparent lack of financial resources, these students find it especially hard to resist the temptation of Elite: ‘You don’t get into Elite and not go, do you?’ asks the rhetoric question Viola similarly to Norma, who sees the cost of her overseas education as an ‘investment’ when comparing her situation to that of her peers back home:

It’s really rough seeing how much I take out in loans, only because it’s, like, wow! So many of

my friends right now they just got their BAs and they're buying houses. They're buying a *set* of houses. They're investing in property for income and I'm, like, okay, I'm *investing in my third degree*. (Norma, Humanities, US)

While the pricey overseas education may not be seen as an essential element for the future, their parents are extremely appreciative of the prestige which comes with studying at Elite: '[when he came to visit] my father was completely speechless. He was completely and utterly blown away by this place. You see, both my parents were really, really poor growing up and I think my dad feels comforted by signs that he's not poor.' Not having access to *any* kind of capital is clearly not a deterrent for these students. Even though the road to Elite is paved with (financial) sacrifices, they are clearly investing in the right places as they are building up their Curricula Vitae in hope of achieving social mobility.

DISCUSSION

The majority of studies on international student mobility are referred to as 'demand-side' theorisations (Findlay, 2011), where the individual is portrayed as a rational decision maker who considers all options, and weighs the pros and cons of each, before making an informed decision. But as Findlay (2011) points out this view is limited as it fails to recognise the importance of the 'cultural, social and economic contexts within which "decisions" are taken' (Findlay, 2011: 164–5). According to King '[m]igration must not be thought of as a single relocation decision by an individual at a moment in time' (King *et al.*, 2006: 259), so there is an argument to be made for research on the 'supply-side': between others, looking into the role of universities and government policies in directing student flows. In line with this, I argue for a contextualised approach, which – next to individual choice – should also consider the sending as well as the receiving context when analysing student mobility decisions, because the existence (or non-existence) of overseas funding schemes generally impede or facilitate individual mobility decisions.

In this paper, the interplay of individual agency with the sending and the receiving context is illustrated through a wide range of entry channels through which doctoral students arrive

to their study destination at Elite. Here, 'individual decisions' are effectively shaped by the availability of local, national or international schemes of funding. Looking at these organised schemes of support, the US example seems to confirm previous assumptions on international students representing a migratory elite. Because the allocation of such prestigious scholarships is dependent on 'exceptional achievement', access is limited to a very selective group of (socially advantaged) applicants able to build up considerable educational achievements into their Curricula Vitae. Here, the social structure of the competition is 'hidden' behind the highly competitive nature of access to these scholarships (Brown, 2006), because developing a 'rounded person' celebrated by the American system of higher education is subject to class dispositions thus reducing the access of those less privileged.

The lack of available scholarships would not deter students from well-to-do families from studying abroad, because 'keeping ahead' of the competition from the lower-class groups is essential in maintaining their existing position (Findlay *et al.*, 2006). But the cases of those willing to 'invest' into their education at top universities resonate well with Recchi's (2006) description of lower-middle class individuals to whom education at Elite – as a future investment – has a special appeal.

Conversely, the availability of funds is essential in allowing other segments of society to make use of international educational opportunities. As the Turkish/Chilean examples demonstrate, such scholarships provide a unique opportunity for social mobility even to those without convertible capital at hand. Applying the carrot and stick approach, governments of developing countries offer the necessary funding for world-class education – with the obligation to return, which is to prevent any potential brain-drain of talented young people who could be tempted to leave for better career opportunities, potentially leading to a win-win situation for both.

In turn, though, such policies pose significant limitations in terms of the choice of institution and destination country, as well as setting out the individual's subsequent career. Because the contractual arrangements require the return of Turkish and Chilean students to their country of origin upon graduation, they do not have much choice in terms of career destination. Still, the

prestigious credentials they take home with them ensure that they are well received, generally being offered academic appointments at top higher education institutions in their home countries.

Although opting for an academic career at home is the obvious choice for government-funded students, European doctoral students, even though driven to academia, are more uncertain about the (geographic) location where they would want to settle. This is the case with Sabine who is unable to commit herself to any particular destination. 'I know that I probably want to work in academia [but] I'm not really set on any place; probably in Europe, maybe in the UK, maybe in Germany, or maybe not, I don't know. But I guess I'm really open to it and just see what comes [...] whatever works out best.' By keeping her options open, she is likely to become one of the many mobile academics following job opportunities wherever they take her.

The self-paying students' future is rather vague – it is yet to be seen whether they return home and/or stay on in academia upon graduation. American scholarship students, on the other hand, voiced their intent to return to the US, but less likely to join the ranks of academics than any other group. However, the symbolic capital they take home with them in the form of prestigious degree certificates can easily be put to work in opening doors to future opportunities. As David (Humanities, US) says,

When you're trying to knock on doors [...] you begin to realise how important the name of an institution is on a business card or a CV. Before, I have never introduced myself as anyone except sort of like 'David, the volunteer', but now I'm 'David, the research student at Elite' and you just go straight to the top in terms of access level.

All in all, studying at Elite is considered to be highly advantageous for one's career regardless of country of origin or career destination. But although students expect a positive relationship between possessing a world-class degree and labour market success, they are often unaware of the potential labour market disadvantages that possessing foreign credentials may bring. This might be because of the nationalised academic careers in some countries 'where mobility opportunities are more broadly shared and where

people who move internationally have made much more marginal, risky career decisions compared to those in nationalized careers from welfare-states with stable pay-offs at home' (Szelényi, 2006: 64).

This is the case of Boyka (Social Science, Romania), who was surprised to hear that after her masters and PhD at Elite, she is no longer wanted in her own country: 'They advised me to do, basically, another PhD. I was just coming out of my PhD, so I was like: "Are you kidding me? Another PhD? All these years, again, on another topic?" I could not even think about it'. Hence, instead of returning home she stayed on at Elite as a post-doc before being offered a lectureship at a top UK HE institution.

Although for some students there is no going back, many others may no longer wish to return home after graduation. Having studied outside of their home countries makes them susceptible to international careers, thus creating a future generation of 'mobile academics' who are not afraid to move countries in order to follow career opportunities in the international higher education sector.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Overall, the paper contributes in several ways to current scholarship on international student mobility. First of all, it challenges the assumptions on international students as a uniform group of 'migratory elite', because it successfully demonstrates that all international students cannot be lumped under the 'elite' category. Although, indeed, a significant proportion of graduate students comes with an abundance of cultural, economic and social capital, many others have little or no capital to start with, or do not come with the full package. Whether they aim to maintain their existing privilege, or significantly increase their competitive advantage, they all use ISM to their individual benefit.

Further, current research is unable to corroborate the assumption that student migration is part of a settlement-strategy, that is, that international students embark on degree mobility with the intention of settling down in the host country (Robertson, 2011). Instead, the paper argues that the prospect of studying at an elite university (Findlay *et al.*, 2012) is the driving force behind individual mobility decisions, because getting a doctorate at a world-class university is integral part

of their future career. As the paper clearly points out, decisions about staying in the UK or returning home are generally determined by the nature of the funding these students receive, as most governmentally funded students are required to return home after completing their doctoral studies. But even those not bound to return home after graduation tend to postpone such decisions until after degree completion, as they feel the need to be flexible in a time of the global economic recession.

Corresponding to this, the research strongly argues against the portrayal of student mobility – solely – in terms of individual choice because policies and funds put in place by sending or receiving contexts intertwine with individual motivations, hence, widening or narrowing the pool of potential international educational opportunities. By acknowledging the significant role of the macro-context (Findlay, 2011) in shaping individual mobility decisions, the paper argues for a more contextualised approach to the analysis of the graduate student migratory phenomenon. In turn, it also provides a rationale for abandoning the term ‘spontaneous mobility’ (implying individual choice instead of organised mobility) in international student mobility scholarship (e.g. Gordon & Jallade, 1996: 133), because a significant proportion of degree mobility does not occur spontaneously, rather is a result of organised schemes of funding.

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