



Forum

Beyond Push and Pull: A New Theory of International Student Mobility

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Abstract

The global mobility of students is a central feature of the internationalization of higher education. The discussions in the current literature on the issue of international student mobility seem to concentrate on three main questions: 1) What is the current pattern of international student mobility? 2) How do we explain the current mobility pattern? 3) More importantly, should we regard the current mobility pattern as a normal state of affairs or a cause for concern? What is missing in the current discussions is how we should steer the future direction of international mobility. Based on a review of the different theoretical approaches to understanding international student mobility, this paper aims to propose a new Glo(bal)-Noble Theory that recognizes the benefits of globalization and the role of neoliberal forces but encourages noble and mindful practices in international education to gradually narrow the gap between the rich and the poor in the world.

Keywords: globalization, international student mobility, glo-noble, realism, idealism



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Introduction

The international mobility of students for higher education has become a question of significant interest in international education research, and many theoretical lenses have been explored. Understanding the pattern of international student mobility has been a top concern for many host countries and institutions of international students. Being able to grasp the future mobility trends is particularly important for their international recruitment strategies and resource allocation. To critical internationalization scholars, the flow of many students from poor countries to rich countries causes brain drain, leaving developing nations with a shortage of skilled workers needed for their own economic and social development. The mobility pattern thus perpetuates and widens global inequality. This paper will first review the existing literature on this issue, before proposing a new theoretical framework to resolve some of the tensions among the current theoretical perspectives.

The Cultural Capital Theory

One way to examine international student mobility is to see it as a rational choice at the individual level. Since as early as the 1960s, higher education has been seen as an investment in human capital with an economic return to the individuals and to a country as a whole (Becker, 1964). Beyond economics, Bourdieu (1984) perceived education as an investment in cultural capital, non-economic assets that serve to shape an individual's social status and opportunities. No matter if it is called human capital or cultural capital, not everyone has equal access to it. People from privileged backgrounds benefit from financial means and cultural familiarity with academic expectations, leading to advantages in academic performance and future career opportunities. Personals from marginalized backgrounds may lack financial means and access to the dominant cultural codes, thus reinforcing social stratification. There are many studies in the literature that have used the Bourdieuan approach to examine international students' mobility patterns. For example, Waters (2006) studied student mobility between Hong Kong and Canada, believing that East Asian students use study abroad as a form of cultural capital accumulation, particularly in elite Western universities.

As it is an investment, it is only rational for individual students and their families to aim for the best return. The rational dimension in the mobility decision process has given rise to the push-pull factors analysis (e.g. Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The push factors are the conditions in students' home countries that serve to "push" students out, such as lack of educational opportunities, poor living conditions and

poor career prospects. The pull factors are the conditions in destination countries that serve to “pull” students to go there, such as quality of education, better living conditions and better post-graduate work opportunities. To predict the direction and the scale of student mobility, one common approach is to lay out and compare a sender country’s push factors and a host country’s pull factors. This is rather straightforward. One such study is Yu et al. (2023) who applied the push-pull framework to analyze the motivations of Chinese students studying in the U.K., highlighting both home and destination factors. It is not difficult to see that, based on push and pull factors, students are always moving from poor countries to rich countries. The direction of mobility is clear. Once again, we need to bear in mind the fact that international education is by nature an elite education. Though it is a rational decision, it is a rational decision only the elite families in poor countries get to make. It takes financial capital to invest in cultural capital. It is beyond the means of regular families in poor countries.

The World-Systems Theory

Another way to examine international student mobility is to see it at a macro level as a natural phenomenon of a global capitalist system. Underlying this perspective is the World-Systems Theory that has been around since the 1970s. According to Wallerstein (1974), to better understand what is happening in the world, the unit of analysis should not be individual nation states. Instead, we should see different nation states as parts of one single labor division system. The world system we live in today has been a capitalist world economy that gradually expanded since the 16th century. More importantly, Wallerstein divides the world into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral regions, explaining how economic and political power is concentrated in core countries, while peripheral and semi-peripheral countries are often exploited or dependent on the core. Based on his 2004 book (Wallerstein, 2004), the core countries are highly industrialized, economically advanced, and politically dominant, such as the United States, Germany and Japan; the peripheral countries are less developed, economically dependent, and often exploited for their raw materials and cheap labor, such as Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Ethiopia; Semi peripheral countries exhibit characteristics of both core and periphery, with some industrialized sectors and some degree of economic diversification, such as China, India and Brazil. The World-Systems Theory has strong explanatory power for international student mobility patterns. Students tend to migrate from periphery countries and semi-periphery countries to core countries for higher education (see e.g. Shields, 2013). The outcome of global student mobility is unfortunately what we often call “brain drain” in favor of core countries. International student mobility

is thus influenced by and contributes to the maintenance of the existing global economic order.

The Critical Internationalization Theory

Both the Cultural Capital Theory and the World-Systems Theory carry inherent critical elements. The issue of underdevelopment in the periphery has been seen as a historical process created by resource exploitation by the core (Frank, 1966). The Dependency Theory developed in Latin America has pointed out how the economic structures imposed during colonialism and perpetuated through neocolonialism have locked poorer nations into a cycle of dependency (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). In the new century, as global higher education expanded and student mobility increased, some scholars in international education grew increasingly concerned about the ethical dimension of global higher education practices. Critical internationalization scholars focus on their analysis on power dynamics, inequality and the socio-economic consequences of global higher education practices, interrogating how higher education internationalization serves to perpetuate colonial legacies, reinforce global hierarchies, and marginalize non-Western knowledge systems (see e.g. Bamberger & Morris, 2023; Vavrus & Pekol, 2015).

Critical internationalization scholars have first critiqued the neoliberal underpinnings of student mobility and the commodification of education, emphasizing the importance of paying attention to the public good in internationalization (Marginson, 2016). They have then revealed the dominance of Western research paradigms and English as the global academic lingua franca in global knowledge production today, both as reasons for the current student mobility pattern (Altbach, 2015; Stein et al., 2020). They also point out that the higher education internationalization practices today, which emphasize international tuition revenue and university global rankings, are a continuation of the Western efforts to colonize and exploit the peripheral regions (Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2017; Takayama et al., 2017). To decolonize higher education internationalization, critical internationalization scholars call for the dismantling of structural inequities by incorporating non-Western epistemic perspectives in university curriculum (Leask, 2015; Stein, 2017), by including the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of universities' internationalization strategies (Ramaswamy et al., 2021), and by shifting the focus of internationalization enterprise from knowledge power toward knowledge diplomacy (Knight, 2022). As a whole, the critical internationalization theory views the current patterns of international student mobility as a deep unethical dimension of the existing models of global higher education.

The Brain Circulation Theory

Given the danger of brain drain, would it be an ethical action for host universities and countries in the Global North to cease admitting international students? According to Stier (2004), there are three fundamental ideologies in higher education internationalization: educationalism, instrumentalism, and idealism. From an educational perspective, internationalization aims to equip students with intercultural competencies, enabling them to thrive in a globalized workforce. Instrumentally, it seeks to enhance a nation's competitiveness within the global knowledge economy. Meanwhile, the idealist perspective views internationalization as a means to foster a more just and equitable world. What this means is that higher education internationalization can serve diverse goals, and the problem with past practices lies in the fact that these three goals have not been pursued in a balanced manner (Liu & Palmer, 2025). The educational and the instrumental goals have been prioritized, but the third idealist goal has been marginalized. Are we able to fix this problem by restricting the flow of international students from developing countries to developed countries? The answer might be no, as it would hurt the educational goal of internationalization, and the educational goal is closely linked to the idealistic goal in the long run.

A comprehensive global quantitative analysis was conducted on 84 developing nations, examining the relationship between study abroad data from the mid-1960s and subsequent economic and political performance in the 1970s (Fry, 1984). The findings revealed significant long-term positive impacts of study abroad on both economic and political outcomes at the macro and national levels. Specifically, the economic benefits of educational mobility were attributed to the acquisition of advanced technical knowledge, increased foreign exchange remittances, and growth in exports and per-capita income. On the political front, exposure to diverse political, cultural, social and economic environments through overseas education was identified as a critical catalyst for fostering social change. This suggests that international educational experiences contribute not only to individual development but also to broader societal progress of their home countries. Based on a systematic review of 53 selected articles, a recent study (Chankseliani et al., 2024) also investigated the role of international student returnees in fostering home country development, emphasizing their significant contributions to economic growth, educational reform, and the promotion of democratic values. With a longitudinal historical case study spanning close to 200 years, Liu and Huang's (2023) study has shown that international education has served as a powerful nation building tool for economic, social and political transformations in China, bringing the country from a century of poverty, chaos and national humiliation to a stronger and more

prosperous country in the 21st century.

Building on the findings of these studies, we can conclude that, in the long term, the international movement of students plays a significant role in advancing nation-building efforts in source countries across the Global South. In this process, students' educational aspirations become intertwined with their home countries' broader national development objectives. Based on case studies of Indian and Chinese immigrant professionals in Silicon Valley who have played a crucial role in supporting their home countries' IT industries with global markets, technology and venture capital, Saxenian (2005) challenged the traditional notion of brain drain by introducing the concept of "brain circulation", where skilled migrants facilitated knowledge transfer, investment and entrepreneurship through transnational diaspora networks. Despite the challenges, we cannot ignore or deny the benefits of the globalization of higher education. To achieve "brain circulation" and to eventually uplift the poor peripheral regions of the world, de-globalization moves, such as a ban on international students, are not ethical actions. International education for nation building is a long-sustained process which requires patience, commitment and consistency (Liu & Huang, 2023). We need to allow globalization to continue to achieve such long-term benefits for the Global South.

Proposing the Glo-Noble Theory

Though aware of the danger of brain drain, no major source countries of international students, such as China and India, have rolled out policies to restrict students' outbound mobility. They are clearly hoping to achieve the educational goal of training globally minded students and ultimately the instrumental goal of accessing Western technology through their citizens' global mobility. To amplify the effect of brain circulation, Saxenian (2005) recommends that source countries of international students develop policies to better engage their skilled diaspora communities overseas, such as incentives for return migration, flexible visa policies, and international collaboration programs. This is exactly what countries like China and India have been doing. In addition, the Glo-Cal Theory (Robertson, 1995) was developed in the 1990s to help countries in the periphery enjoy the benefits of globalization but mitigate the potential harm. They are reminded of the necessity to adjust, adapt, and in some cases, avoid Western practices borrowed into their systems. As the name of the theory suggests, Global South countries can pursue global standards in nation building but should seek locally suited ways to achieve that.

For major host countries and universities of international students in the Global North to engage in

more ethical practices of internationalization, this paper proposes a Glo-Noble Theory. The Glo(bal) part of the theory recognizes that the mobility of students from periphery to core is not a reason for celebration, but a normal state of affairs in a globalized world. It is a part and parcel of the economic globalization process driven by neoliberal interests. It is not entirely unethical for host countries and universities to take international students and charge them the full cost of their education. After all, they are not obligated to subsidize their education. It is not entirely unethical either to keep some international graduates to stay and fill local labor market shortages, as it reflects the students' free will to stay. All countries should be allowed to pursue their instrumental national interests in international education. The fundamental principle of comparative advantage in a global market economy still prevails (Ricardo, 1817). However, international education should not be a zero-sum game, but a win-win endeavor. The Noble part of the theory invites host countries and universities of international students to engage in noble actions to help narrow the gap between the rich and the poor of the world and make the world a better place to live for all. What are the possible noble actions they can take?

The natural course of globalization holds the promise of ultimately elevating peripheral regions of the world out of underdevelopment. Japan, Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan were historically strong source countries of international students. Yet, in the new century, their education abroad numbers have peaked and declined. This shows that, when a country/region's economy reaches a certain level, its young people's interests in studying abroad tend to decline. Then the interests from China and India increased. After China and India, we might see an increased interest from other Southeast Asian countries and countries in Latin America and Africa. But for the benefits of global higher education to reach all parts of the world, it is important that the core countries do not obstruct the natural flow of student mobility for nationalist and protectionist reasons, either banning students from coming in or restricting talents from leaving. International students need to be taken, not as new citizens of the West, but as global citizens who can make positive contributions to the global problems we face today, no matter where they will live (Liu, 2023; 2024). It is a noble action for Global North universities to write SGDs into institutional strategic plans, and knowledge diplomacy is a noble call too, but they need to make sure that these are authentic goals, not only lip service. They need to be backed by substantive programs and activities. Once again, the educational and instrumental goals of internationalization need to be balanced with the idealistic goal of building a more equitable world. The Glo-Noble Theory is a realistic and idealistic theory at the same time.

Conclusion

The existing theoretical perspectives on international student mobility present a tension between the benefits of globalization in higher education and the dangers of the same process. This paper proposes a dialectical new theory, called the Glo(bal)-Noble Theory, that aims to reconcile such a tension, embracing the global forces to drive student mobility but taking noble actions at the same time to help achieve global brain circulation. It recognizes the fact that students will continue to flow from peripheral regions to the core countries in the future for higher education, and it is unethical to obstruct the flow, but the theory reminds recipient countries and universities of their responsibility to take noble actions to enable and encourage brain circulation. What these noble actions are should become an important focus of future studies.

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