Geopolitics and Student Mobility

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Virtual Conference: Meeting the challenge of student mobility in a global pandemic
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Key turbulences
Historic view on geopolitics and student mobility
International students as political tools
China, the US and Australia
Implications for rethinking international education
Key turbulences

- Geopolitics, including national protectionism, inward looking nationalism & far-right policies
- Economics (GFC)
- Natural disasters (e.g. Bushfire)
- Pandemic (SARS, COVID-19)
- Systemic racism/COVID-19 related racism
- Spread of grassroots social and political movements
  (Tran, 2020a; Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2020)
Colonisation and student mobility: Vietnam-France

- French colonisation: 1858 -1954.
- Colonial geopolitics and student mobility:
  - Sponsored Vietnamese students and scholars to study in France
  - Sponsoring country’s aim: help Vietnamese students learn about the foundations and the superstructures of French civilization
  - Young Vietnamese scholars became progressive-minded and actively promoted national independence.
- The mobility scheme: destructive to the maintenance of French rule in Indochina
- After the Vietnam war
  - student mobility to support Vietnam’s aspiration of regional and world integration and human capacity building
- (Pham and Fry, 2002; Tran, Marginson & Nguyen, 2014; Welch, 2010)
International students as political tools

- In 2018, Saudi Arabia’s government instructed all its citizens studying in Canada to return home (Stephenson, 2018): around 12,000 students

- Reciprocal banning of mainland Chinese students by China and Taiwan
  - China temporarily stopped sending mainland Chinese students to Taiwan in April 2020
  - Taiwan’s announcement of a temporary ban of mainland Chinese students from entering the island (Lo, 2020)

- Political movements driven by pro-nationalism and anti-immigration fed by fears around COVID-19 create as “new world order”
  - Brexit, the Trump administration’s isolationism and the rise of the far-right parties in Europe (Altbach and de Wit, 2017, Hsieh, 2020).
The **May 2020 Presidential Proclamation** sought to cancel visas of 3,000 Chinese students and researchers with perceived ties with the Chinese military.

A highly problematic approach generalising anyone with ties to China, likely to trigger anti-Chinese sentiment and Chinese reciprocation.

(Lewis, 2020; Wong and Barnes, 2020)
COVID-19 has escalated geopolitical tensions

- The Australian government’s calls for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19 and responses to issues related to Hong Kong’s security law, Taiwan and South China Sea introduction of new visa options for Hong Kong students → surge in applications from HK

- In response, China has:
  - warned their students from travelling to Australia (Kuo and Murphy, 2020)
  - threatened to divert thousands of Chinese students to the UK (Bagshaw et al., 2020).
  - UK: an increase by 9 percent in the number of non-EU international students (Mittelmeier et al., 2020).

- South China Sea and the nine-dash line
  - Tensions: Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam ↔ China → multiple reports on China’s escalation in the South China Sea amid COVID-19 (Heydarian, 2020; Walden & Choahan, 2020) → potentially affect regional student mobility in East Asia
Exert influence through international education
(i) partnerships with foreign universities (Yang, 2008),
(ii) increasing funding for research conducted in foreign universities and
(iii) setting up off-shore campuses eg. in Laos, Malaysia, Thailand and Japan (He and Wilkins, 2018).

“Bring-in” (qing jilai zhanlue) strategy to attract international students to China, re-position China as a regional education hub (Cheng, 2009): In 2018, 492,185 IS (MOE PRC, 2019)

“Go-out” and “Bring-in”: short-term intra-degree mobility

Belt & Road, Confucius Institutes (CIs), language schools and scholarships for students (Hall, 2017)

By 2017: 516 CIs and 1,076 Confucius Classrooms in primary and secondary schools in 142 countries and regions globally (Haban News, 2017; Luqiu and McCarthy, 2019).

In Australia

pressure to register CIs in 13 host universities under the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (Galloway et al., 2020)

In August 2020, new laws proposed to increase control over universities’ international relations and collaborative research project arrangements (Fitzgerald, 2020)
Outbound mobility and geopolitics

- Aligning outbound mobility more closely with economic and political interests → a shift in targeted destinations (Gribble & Tran, 2016)
- The Australian government seeks to strengthen Australia’s position in the Indo-Pacific, a region critical to its political, cultural and economic development. (Tran, 2020b)
- Australian students engaged in study abroad in the Indo-Pacific regarded as agents for humanising foreign policy objectives (Lowe, 2014, 2015), as actors of public (soft) diplomacy (Tran & Vu, 2018) & as subjects of political agendas (Tran & Bui, Forthcoming).
- Other signature outbound motility programs: ‘Generation UK-China’; ‘Generation UK-India’, and USA’s ‘100,000 Strong China’
- Learning abroad is no longer just about serving individual students’ education and institutional partnerships but also about nation states’ political, diplomatic and economic agendas
Political dimension of IoHE: as a tool to serve colonial imperatives (earlier days) and then foster mutual understanding, cooperation, reduce tensions between nations and create peace.

International education has again been weaponised in context of escalating political tensions and the disputes of the mishandling of COVID-19

“When governments sneeze, then international education catches cold”

Chinese students in particular are positioned as venues for gov political responses: impacts on their security, wellbeing, study, career plans and future aspirations

IE is in crisis because its philosophy based on liberal concepts of “freedom, democracy, trade, peace, development and hospitality” are challenged by “racist, white supremacist, isolationist, and war-mongering national populism and far-right politics” (Peters, 2020, p. 1240)

The role of IHE beyond viewing inbound and outbound mobility students as of economic value and objects in political games to consider values of multilateral relationship building, regional unity and solidarity and inclusiveness.

People-to-people connections, institution-to-institution connections and country-to-country connections
References


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