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Politicizing Mobility in the COVID-19 Pandemic: International Student Mobility in Israel, China, and the United Arab Emirates

Annette Bamberger[1] · **Min Ji Kim**[2] · **Seungah Sarah Lee**[3] · **Fei Yan**[4]

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Abstract
We critically examine the politicization of international student mobility (ISM) during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on Israel, China, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Applying Vicki Squire's framework of the politics of control and migration, we reveal how the pandemic intensified existing political tensions and inequalities, challenging depoliticized narratives of ISM. The study demonstrates how crises magnify societal organizing principles and embed mobility policies within broader struggles over national identity, economic priorities, and geopolitical strategies. In Israel, selective border reopening exposed tensions between religious and secular interests, with lobbying efforts shaping mobility outcomes. China's intensified regulation of ISM highlighted the state's efforts to leverage mobility as a tool for soft power, narrative control, and geopolitical positioning. In the UAE, private universities adapted by targeting 'permanently temporary' expatriates with tuition incentives, revealing systemic inequities within its dual-track higher education system. Our analysis underscores ISM as a dynamic and contested field shaped by the interplay of state power, institutional strategies, and individual agency. We highlight the co-constitutive relationship between control and migration politics, demonstrating how mobility evolves across governance systems and through negotiation and resistance. These findings offer critical insights into ISM's role as a site of political contestation and its implications for equity, access, and social justice.

Keywords COVID-19 · International students · Geopolitics · International student mobility · Social justice · Internationalization

Introduction

International student mobility (ISM), broadly defined as the movement of individuals across international borders to study at universities or other higher education institutions (HEIs), has long been intertwined with political dynamics

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

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(Shkoler & Rabenu, 2020). Historically, ISM was deeply embedded in the geopolitical landscape of the Cold War, serving as a tool in the battle for 'hearts and minds' between the Soviet Bloc and the West. However, since the onset of globalization in the 1990s, ISM has increasingly been portrayed as a largely depoliticized activity, emphasizing economic prospects over political considerations (Bamberger & Morris, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this narrative, magnifying the intersection of globalization, educational (in)justice, and mobility governance. Travel restrictions, financial hardships, and the sudden shift to remote learning had a profound impact on ISM, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities and highlighting systemic inequities (Bilecen, 2020). Simultaneously, a surge of nationalism and populism (Brøgger, 2023), along with escalating geopolitical tensions (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023), foregrounded the role of the state in mediating mobility and a series of darker narratives emerged, such as the proliferation of xenophobic rhetoric and instances of racism (Agyenim-Boateng & Watson, 2023; Mok & Zhang, 2022). These shifts prompt the need for a deeper understanding of the complexities in the ways politics interact with international higher education (HE), and their implications for social justice.

Existing research on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on ISM tends to focus on crisis management at the institutional level (e.g. Cordova et al., 2021), experiences of marginalized students (Koo et al., 2021; Mbous et al., 2022), and the growth of new forms of mobility such as virtual and 'at a distance' internationalization (e.g. Bruhn-Zass, 2022; Woicolesco et al., 2022). While these studies raise concerns around issues of (in)equality and social justice for international students during the pandemic, from a policy perspective, rather less is known about the responses of countries with ISM recruitment policies in place during COVID-19. The adaptation or hindrance of these policies in response to pandemic politics, which have raised concerns about equity and social justice, particularly warrants critical examination. The few studies which address policy perspectives, emanating predominantly from established Anglophone international student destinations, indicate that the pandemic shifted policies and raised considerable ethical issues (see Brunner, 2022; Matsumoto & Viczko, 2023). Importantly, rather less is known about how ISM is politicized during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in emerging international student destinations, and how this politicization impacts on international student policies, shaping (in)equalities.

This study aims to address this gap by employing Vicki Squire's (2010) approach to 'politicizing mobility.' Squire's framework explores how mobility becomes a contested space through the interplay between the *politics of control*—state-driven mechanisms designed to regulate or restrict movement—and the *politics of migration*, which encompasses acts of resistance, advocacy, and negotiation by individuals and groups to challenge or adapt to these controls. This perspective reveals the dynamic and often contradictory ways in which mobility is facilitated and constrained, emphasizing its role as a site of political struggle with significant implications for social justice. By adopting a multiple comparative case study approach (Stake, 2013) of Israel, China, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), we explore how ISM was politicized and redefined in three nation-states

situated outside the traditional Anglophone and European international student recruitment destinations, which had national policies and programs in place to promote ISM at the time of the pandemic (Bamberger & Kim, 2023; Gao & de Wit, 2017; Johnson, 2020). This study is important for two reasons: first, it can foster understanding of the different political processes at play which shape ISM policies, providing explanation for particular patterns of inclusion and exclusion; and second, it can provide insights into the resilience and adaptability of international education policies in the face of global crises, informing future policies and strategies to uphold social justice and equitable access amidst unforeseen challenges.

We employed a multiple case study methodology, which is well-suited to describe, document, and critically analyze phenomena within their contexts and their contributions to theory construction and evolution in a given field (Stake, 2013). This approach enhances the robustness of claims regarding the phenomenon under investigation by comparing similarities and differences across cases, providing critical insights into explanatory mechanisms and theoretical development (Landman, 2008). The three cases—Israel, China, and the UAE—were purposefully selected to illuminate how ISM was politicized during the COVID-19 pandemic. While all three cases exhibit this politicization during crisis, they also demonstrate significant differences stemming from diverse political forces, governance structures, and sociocultural contexts. For example, the Israeli case reflects tensions around national identity and religious priorities, the Chinese case highlights the role of state control in geopolitical strategy, and the UAE case reveals systemic inequities within a dual-track HE system. These cases, therefore, provide a comparative lens to analyze the intersection of ISM and political dynamics, while recognizing the unique political, social, historical, and cultural characteristics of each context.

Our data collection and analysis focused on two dimensions: the *politics of control*, encompassing state actions to regulate or restrict mobility, and the *politics of migration*, referring to actions by various actors to resist, acquiesce, or advocate for mobility. First, we examined national policies aimed at promoting student mobility in place before the pandemic and their evolution. Next, we analyzed the responses to these policies, focusing on universities, NGOs and government regulators and departments within each context that were heavily involved in delivering national ISM programs and policies. Consistent with the case study methodology, we utilized multiple data sources, including national and local government policies, reports, and decisions; programs and decisions from national HE authorities and their steering/advisory committees; monitoring reports from local NGOs; university websites and public notices; and domestic media coverage. For the Israeli case, we supplemented this documentary analysis with an elite interview, conducted with a high-ranking official involved during the crisis, to confirm emerging themes and timelines.

The data collection was conducted by different members of the research team, depending on their familiarity with the specific case context. We compared data across the two dimensions (politics of control and migration) to identify patterns and divergences. Employing a critical policy perspective (Apple, 2019), we utilized an inductive qualitative approach to analyze the documents (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), focusing on the local contexts in which policies were developed, their stated

aims and assumptions, their discursive constructions, and their evolution over the crisis. We also considered the impacts of these policies on social justice and mobility. Throughout the analysis, data from different sources were compared within and across cases. Most documents were in Chinese, Hebrew, Arabic and English, and translations were performed as necessary by the authors. To ensure trustworthiness, we provide a robust audit trail of publicly available sources (Bassey, 1999). Through our analysis, we identify and explain the shifts in the ways in which international students are portrayed and politicized, and the corresponding implications for social justice. We argue that the pandemic intervened in existing political tensions, domestic and international, and became a site of contestation with significant repercussions for social justice.

International Students, Politicizing Mobility and Social Justice

The politicization of COVID-19 responses has been observed, often extending beyond national boundaries. Global educational actors, such as the OECD, World Bank, and UNESCO, have been critiqued for leveraging the pandemic as a means to advance pre-existing agendas, such as AI, digital transformation, and social and emotional skills (Kim, 2024; Morris et al., 2022). Similarly, within ISM, this politicization intensified with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as countries closed their borders to international students, citing the need to safeguard their citizens' public health. Brunner (2022), for example, analyzed the pandemic's impact on Canada's 'education-migration' system, identifying ethical tensions, 'unsettling paradoxes,' and contradictory narratives such as 'we are all in it together' and 'close the borders' (p. 78, 93). Such contradictions illuminate how crises can expose and exacerbate underlying inequalities within mobility regimes. In doing so, they foreground the need to examine how international students are differentially affected by state responses, and how those responses are shaped by politics. These impacts are particularly acute for students from the Global South, or those who do not fit dominant profiles of "ideal" mobile subjects (Beech, 2018; Lomer, 2018).

Critical examinations of international student policies have employed various approaches, including discursive analyses that reveal how discourses of exceptionalism or deficit affect international student perceptions, preparations, and experiences, with significant implications for social justice (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). For example, Lomer (2018) highlights the intertwined nature of 'quality' and socio-economic status in UK international student recruitment policy, emphasizing its exclusionary impact. While these studies are helpful to reveal the subjectification of international students in policies and the implications for social justice, with few notable exceptions (e.g. Chankseliani, 2018; Trilokekar et al., 2020) there is a comparative lack of focus on the politicized nature of student mobility and the geopolitical crises that contribute to this politicization. Delving into these political foundations and processes, may reveal the nuanced ways in which ISM is both facilitated and constrained during crises, shedding light on the broader implications of such mobility for equity, access, and justice.

To analyze this relationship between politics and ISM, we adopt Squire's (2010) framework for 'politicizing mobility' focusing on two interrelated dimensions: the *politics of control* and the *politics of migration*. She defines a *politics of control* as 'struggles to master movement, extract labour and enclose space (Squire, 2010, p. 11).' In the case of ISM, we can conceive of visa, biometric border security, and security and policing technologies by HEIs imposed by government regulation, as part of the expansive control apparatus. Such a *politics of control* disproportionately affect students (e.g. based on race, ethnicity, citizenship, gender, socio-economic status) restricting their access to international education and undermining equitable mobility (Yang, 2020). This disparity in access highlights the systemic and institutionalized power structures that dictate who get to move, study, and benefit from international educational opportunities.

In contrast, the *politics of migration* refers to a range of actions and responses that individuals and groups employ to navigate, contest, or adapt to the *politics of control*. These include acts of lobbying, solidarity, and advocacy by students, NGOs, and civil society groups, which aim to challenge restrictive policies and reclaim mobility. Acts of resistance—such as student activism—demonstrate how the *politics of migration* can advocate for mobility justice. However, these struggles also reveal tensions, as expanding rights for some groups may inadvertently limit opportunities for others. This underscores the interconnected nature of control and migration, highlighting ISM as both a contested space and a potential pathway for advancing social justice. In this sense the *politics of control* are the policies/practices carried out, often times by national or institutional authorities to constrain or ease mobility, while the *politics of migration* may be acts of lobbying, solidarity or non-compliance, and adaptation enacted by different constellations of actors.

Squire (2010) argues that the *politics of mobility* is internally differentiated. This differentiation arises both from the coexistence of two divergent political forms—control and migration—and from variations within these forms. For instance, while governments enforce control through myriad policies, resistance manifests in diverse ways, such as legal challenges, grassroots campaigns, or selective adaptation or non-compliance. These interactions reveal a multiplicity of struggles inherent in mobility, shaped by different actors, contexts, and forms of capital (e.g., economic, social, cultural). Thus, we can consider that the very portrayal of an international student, would be affected by these dynamic processes and the creation of 'international student' – in terms of an object and subject – to be continually contested and redefined. This framework prompts critical questions such as: How are international students constituted as subjects and/or as objects through a *politics of control*? How are international students produced, resisted, contested, appropriated and re-appropriated through political struggles or a *politics of migration*?

Setting the Scene: Israel

Historically, Israel's ISM policy has largely focused on the Jewish diaspora. However, the 2017–2022 Council of Higher Education (CHE) national plan aimed to enhance the quality and competitiveness of the HE system by increasing the international student cohort, which was significantly below the OECD average (Maoz, 2016). The strategy emphasized 'normalizing' Israel as an education destination through marketing and infrastructure improvements, targeting outstanding students from Asia, particularly China and India, alongside Jewish students from North America (Bamberger, 2019). This dual approach reflects Israel's attempt to broaden its appeal as an international education destination while continuing to draw on longstanding ties to the Jewish diaspora.

Israeli HE consists of two distinct forms: universities and colleges, and yeshivas, each with unique approaches to international student engagement. Universities and colleges are open to all students, regardless of religious background, and offer diverse subjects, including academic Jewish studies. While some have historically targeted Jewish students, this focus had declined in recent years (Bamberger et al., 2023; Sinuany-Stern, 2019)[1] and many universities emphasize research collaboration in ISM strategies.

In contrast, yeshivas, traditional Jewish learning centers, attract more international students than universities, with approximately 20,000 students comprising 10–20% of their total enrollment and 50% of female yeshiva students in Israel (CBS, 2021). Unlike universities, yeshivas lack formal national recruitment policies but benefit from government-subsidized programs like Masa Israel,[2] reflecting informal support for international engagement. Moreover, there are notable differences among yeshivas themselves. For example, Orthodox yeshivas often attract students for short-term religious study before pursuing secular careers, while Ultra-Orthodox yeshivas cater to those dedicating their lives to Torah study. These distinctions highlight the varied priorities of religious communities and the broader diversity within Israeli HE.

As the COVID-19 pandemic loomed, Israel had initiated policy to internationalize its HE sector, with an emphasis on recruiting and supporting international students. This policy was underpinned by a commitment to attract a diverse student body from various regions, marking a shift towards 'de-ethnicized' internationalization. This approach represented a departure from the traditional focus on the Jewish diaspora, aiming instead to foster a more inclusive academic environment that prioritized 'excellence' by targeting a broader scope of students capable of contributing to academic development, international relations, and nation-building. The policy's prominence was evidenced by its designation as a key strategic pillar, supported

[1] However, there appears to be a renewed emphasis on attracting Jewish international students, driven by the current Israel-Gaza War and its broader societal impacts.

[2] Masa Israel offers immersive experiences in Israel for young Jewish adults, focusing on personal and professional growth through a variety of programs like study abroad, internships, and Jewish studies, supported by the Government of Israel and the Jewish Agency.

by substantial allocations of budget and staff resources by the CHE. In conjunction with these formal HE policies, the Israeli government also indirectly supported programs and recruitment efforts for Jewish international students to attend the yeshiva system.

Politicization of ISM in the (post)COVID era: Israel

As the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread globally, Israel, like many countries, quickly shut its borders to non-citizens, enacting a *politics of control*. This abrupt closure had a significant impact on a diverse group of individuals in Israel on A2 visas, including university students, researchers, yeshiva students, and participants in gap year programs. In response to this situation, a loose coalition of educational and religious institutions across Israel began lobbying the government for the re-entry of their international students and program participants, each highlighting the contributions to national interests of these different groups and their conditions/characteristics as related to COVID-19, enacting a *politics of migration*. However, as Squire (2010) indicates, the *politics of migration* was differentiated.

The CHE, representing the universities and colleges, largely relied on appeals towards academic excellence and science, and the maturity of their students to undertake the quarantine and public safety requirements. A senior CHE administrator elaborated:

'We did it very much from a research-science-excellence perspective… these are people who live here significant periods of time. They're young adults, adults who are responsible. Because the main concerns [of the government] were about safety. About COVID and quarantine… They were afraid that they would come and they wouldn't do it and that there would be unsafe conditions. So we were like, these are scientists and they come to research and they're not coming to party and spread COVID. They're coming to live, to work and to contribute to the academic excellence of the country….I had to write lots of letters, justifying why people were coming so that they would give them the entry permits. And that was what we would say in the letters. They contribute to this world leading research lab in this university. And therefore, it's really important for them to be here now…we very much focus on the scientific and academic importance of international students.'

Yeshiva and gap year students are often associated with nation-building efforts in Israel[3], reflecting its national identity as the Jewish state. Their appeals to government officials during times of crisis were rooted in this identity, emphasizing the state's obligation to open its borders to fellow Jews worldwide.

Despite the different purposes of study, contributions to the state, personal characteristics, and living conditions, a senior official in the CHE indicated that early in the pandemic, government officials refused to treat these categories as distinct

[3] However, it is important to recognize that not all streams of Judaism or all yeshivas share this association: some Ultra-Orthodox communities oppose the state for religious reasons, rejecting Zionism and the modern nation-building project.

and make policies for different students, despite, the request of the CHE. While ad hoc exceptions were made for specific individuals (e.g. particular laboratories who needed researchers to return), the category of 'international students,' under the A2 visa remained diverse. This lumping together was at once advantageous and disadvantageous for the university and college international students. The large and influential lobby in support of the yeshiva and gap program students, led by a loose coalition of yeshiva heads, program leaders, and influential figures including Isaac Herzog, at the time the head of the Jewish Agency for Israel, and the current President of Israel, helped their cause. Nevertheless, the fact that the yeshivas and gap year participants predominantly came from the US, a country experiencing high infection rates, and were linked to Israel's Ultra-Orthodox community—which faced significant domestic criticism for flouting COVID-19 restrictions and experiencing high infection rates within its groups—was perceived as a drawback. A senior CHE official stated:

'It could have been detrimental because the fact that there was so much in the news about how the yeshivas weren't abiding by the COVID guidelines and we were really trying to say the universities are taking care of this, the students are taking care of this, don't lump us in...it was very important for us to emphasize that it was not 18 year-old kids or not six people living in one dorm…they're different people…so it's mixed because we didn't want them to be lumped in the same category as yeshiva students, because of the bad image, I think in the media at the time of like how the Haredim [Ultra-Orthodox] are dealing with COVID-19.'

Eventually the lobbying reaped dividends. On August 3, 2020, Israel adjusted its regime of control and announced that it would allow special regulations for international students to enter the country primarily to attend universities, yeshivas, gap year programmes, and Jewish youth Aliyah programmes (TheMarker, 2020). The majority of the students were from the US (Ibid). Prof. Roni Gamzo, who was named as the state project manager charged with handling the COVID-19 pandemic, declared:

'In this complex period, there must be a balance between maintaining public health and maintaining the values of the state and the relationship with world Jewry' (Ashkenazi, 2020).

Notably, he did not mention the CHE aims attached to international students, around excellence and academic research. The Minster of the Interior, Aryeh Derei, from the Ultra-Orthodox Shas party in a letter to the yeshiva heads wrote:

'Due to the importance of studying the Torah and returning to regular studies, I decided in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health to allow the older students of the holy yeshiva, and their families who wish to return to Israel with valid visas, to return to study in educational institutions' (Shaul, 2020).

In this letter, he announced the new procedures, which were meant to streamline bureaucracy through the Ministry of the Interior and allow for special quarantine conditions (i.e. on the yeshiva campuses). This illustrates Squire's (2010) assertion that 'immobility is not the inevitable objective or outcome of struggles to master movement' (p.11), rather a *politics of control* can be used to facilitate mobility as well.

The new policy was contested, mobilizing a renewed *politics of migration*. The chairman of Israel Beitenu, a right-wing secular party, Minister of Knesset (MK) Avigdor Lieberman, known for his anti-Ultra-Orthodox policies and postures, strongly spoke out against the intention to bring yeshiva students into Israel and called the decision 'a health hazard.' In a letter to Prof. Gamzo he wrote:

'In the last few days, we have witnessed publications that the government allowed about 16,000 immigrants from the US, who are not citizens of Israel, to arrive in Israel for the holidays, without prior testing for the detection of the corona virus. It is clear to anyone… that this is a danger to public health and can lead us to an emergency situation' (Bresky et al., 2020).

Tamar Zandberg, a MK from the left-wing Meretz party wrote on Twitter (now X), after the decision to allow international students into Israel:

'The discrimination simply cries out to the heavens: 12,000 foreign yeshiva students will enter Israel while thousands of Israeli families, some of them parents of children, are still stuck apart for months... (August, 3, 2020).'

In this context, international students found themselves at the intersection of complex political contestation. The categorization of 'international students' became entwined with Jewishness and particularly the Ultra-Orthodox community, leading to a renewed politicization of their presence in Israel. Consequently, international students faced a dual reality: while they were granted entry into Israel in part due to the political lobbying of the Ultra-Orthodox sector, this connection also carried social and political stigmas. Simultaneously, this situation highlighted discrepancies in the treatment of Israelis with non-citizen (usually non-Jewish) family members abroad, including spouses, partners, or children, who were denied entry into the country. As illustrated by the sentiments of MKs Avigdor and Zandberg, this exclusion was perceived by secular factions across the political spectrum as indicative of a broader politics of prioritizing Ultra-Orthodox interests and religious values over the needs and rights of the secular population. The contention surrounding this issue was exacerbated by ongoing societal restrictions and the looming prospect of another lockdown, underscoring the deep divisions within Israeli society regarding the character of the state and its balance between religious and secular values which were ignited during the pandemic.

Setting the Scene: China

After the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, China initiated a series of new market-oriented economic development strategies under the name of the Open Door Policy, 'opening up' to foreign capital, technology, and internationalization while also maintaining certain socialist principles – often referred to as 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' (Lo & Pan, 2021). Coupled with the increasing internal demands for HE, the strictly centralized HE system promoted during the Mao era was perceived as inefficient or incapable of meeting China's needs to compete in the global economy. A growing recognition of the need for a more flexible and efficient HE system led to significant alterations in the party-state's approach to

governing HE, notably the introduction of tuition fees in the late 1980s and the diversification of HE provision through non-state providers (Mok & Han, 2017).

Internationalization of higher education (IHE) simultaneously emerged as an important strategic goal of the party-state, resulting in a gradual regulatory relaxation of ISM from the 1980s (Zheng & Kapoor, 2021) and the expansion of transnational provision through the initiation of the *Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools* initiative (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2003). Unlike the Cultural Revolution period, during which intellectuals were held in suspicion, the party-state sought to restore their social status as key members of the socialist modernization project (Swanson & Zhian, 1987). However, Perry (2020) argues that, particularly in the post-Tiananmen era, political control over HEIs was reinstated, in an arrangement in which the government-university relation is sustained by the political compliance of universities and intellectuals in exchange for privileges, fundings, and benefits.

Similarly, the operation of IHE itself remained under strong state governance, notable example being the establishment of the China Scholarship Council (CSC) in 1996, which remains a key government funding scheme for Chinese students and researchers studying overseas. Other alleged avenues of political influence over both individual and academic mobility include the Chinese embassies abroad, the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) (1970s onwards), the Confucius Institute (2004 onwards), and more recently, various 'talent schemes' (e.g., the 'Thousand Talent Program' and the 'Ten Thousand Talent Program') aimed at repatriating ethnic Chinese living overseas to their motherland (Han & Tong, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2019a; Kim, 2023). Underlying these governing mechanisms is the principle pertaining to the dualistic role expected of the overseas Chinese diaspora, especially students abroad, who are anticipated to serve as civilian 'ambassadors' contributing to China's soft power projects and as economic resources. Liu (2022) argues that China's outbound student mobility policies are increasingly prioritizing this aspect, particularly amidst escalating geopolitical tensions, with a greater emphasis on '[remoulding] state-student relations during students' studies abroad, rather than following their post-study return' (p.714).

While studies have examined how the recent changes in the political economy have influenced the party-state's control of ISM and students' experience of mobility (Liu & Peng, 2023; Peters et al., 2020), there have been few attempts to analyze how 'mobility' has become a subject of the *politics of control* not just for Chinese students studying overseas but also international students studying in China. The following section explores this in the context of two distinct yet intertwined developments in the global political economy: the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalating geopolitical tensions between China and Western countries. It delves into how, under Xi's leadership, the CCP has shifted its crisis management approach to shape the *politics of migration* of international students.

Politicization of ISM in the (post)COVID era: China

Shortly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, in January 2020, the General Office of the State Council (2020) issued a notice to postpone the 2020 spring semester. The MOE (2020a) subsequently issued instructions on the deployment of

online teaching in HEIs, facilitating students' return to studies remotely. Stringent lockdown measures and travel restrictions were imposed, restricting the physical mobility of both international students and the overseas Chinese diaspora. These measures lasted until January 2023 when the government downgraded its pandemic management from Class A to a less restrictive Class B, eliminating quarantine restrictions for inbound travelers and students, and ceasing tracking close contacts or designating high-risk areas (Xinhua, 2022).

The state's active role in regulating student mobility and study destinations was noteworthy. Like other nations, the government consistently monitored and issued travel alerts for countries identified as high-risk (State Council, 2020). However, the identification of 'risk' was based not only on the epidemic situation in other countries but also on their ongoing geopolitical relationships with China. The state's issuance of a Study Abroad Warning, in fact, dates to the pre-COVID era, which primarily reflected geopolitical tensions with the U.S.:

'For some time, visas for some Chinese students studying in the United States have been restricted, leading to longer visa review periods, shortened validity periods, and increased refusal rates, affecting the normal study and completion of studies in the United States for Chinese students. The MOE reminds students and scholars to strengthen risk assessment before studying abroad, enhance awareness of prevention, and make corresponding preparations' (MOE, 2019a).

The outbreak of COVID-19, however, brought concerns of racism and xenophobic hate crimes to the forefront, with an illustrative example being Australia. The Chinese government issued a Study Abroad Warning for two consecutive years in 2020 and 2021, focusing on incidents of racial discrimination:

'Major universities in Australia are scheduled to reopen around July. The global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has not been effectively controlled, posing risks to international travel and open campuses. During the pandemic, there have been several discriminatory incidents targeting Asians in Australia. The MOE reminds all international students to conduct thorough risk assessments and to carefully consider whether to travel to or return to Australia for study at this time' (MOE, 2020b).

Already prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, bilateral relations between China and Australia were turning sour; Australia—along with 21 other nations—signed a letter to the UN Human Rights Council and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in July 2019, condemning China's mass internment and repression of Uyghurs and other minority groups (Human Rights Watch, 2019b). The relationship worsened when Australia's Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, called for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19, alleging that China was its origin. Soon after, China imposed import tariffs on Australian products, including Australian barley, coal, and red meat (Choudhury, 2020). Compared to the pre-pandemic era, when the number of Chinese international students studying in Australian universities amounted to 261,000 in 2019 (Australian Government, 2019), the figure declined to 116,700 by June 2022 (Statista, 2023a). Xiao Qian, China's ambassador to Australia, identified the poor political relations between the two countries as the reason for the reluctance of Chinese students to come to Australia, and that this sentiment could change once the relationship improves (*The* Guardian, 2023). The post-COVID era, marked by the Australia Labor Party's victory in the 2022 federal

election, shows signs of improving relations between the two countries, as reflected in the rebound of Chinese international student numbers in Australia to approximately 152,000 as of July 2023 (Statista, 2023b).

The pandemic also posed challenges to China's efforts to establish itself as an attractive study destination. As observed in neighboring countries like Korea and Japan (Bamberger & Kim, 2023; Enkhtur et al., 2021), its transnational HE cooperation reflects the country's geopolitical ties. China's Sino-African strategy, initiated in the 1990s, for example, has resulted in a rapid increase in the number of Black African international students studying in Chinese universities, driven by the provision of scholarships through the CSC under the 'China-Africa Friendship' program. The number of African students grew from 2757 in 2005 to approximately 82,000 in 2018, marking a 30-fold increase (MOE, 2019b), particularly driven by the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) launched in 2013. Shih and Cao (2022) further note that scholarship recipients from BRI countries have increased more rapidly than those from non-BRI countries.

However, the pandemic brought about heightened xenophobia and discrimination sentiments not only against Asian students studying in Western societies (Haft & Zhou, 2021), but also towards Black Africans and other racial groups during the pandemic in China (for 'double discrimination' issue, see Agyenim-Boateng & Watson, 2023; Xu et al., 2021). The depiction of Black Africans as foreign threats or sources of contamination on platforms like Weibo, combined with the Chinese government's apparent inaction in removing many racist online posts, has raised concerns about a perceived political tolerance for anti-Black sentiments (Gu & Ho, 2024). Other discriminatory issues included the Chinese government withholding scholarships from international students who left the country at the start of the pandemic (Khan, 2021). With escalating allegations against China regarding discrimination faced by international students, visible state-level efforts have been made to maintain both its geopolitical ties and China's positive national image as a study destination, efforts which were central to the Chinese government's mantra of 'Tell China's Story Well' (讲好中国故事) (see Vickers & Chen, 2024). This includes Xi Jinping's response to a letter from Pakistani students at the Beijing University of Science and Technology (Party Committee, 2020), and the MOE posting news articles covering appreciative narratives of Pakistani students who chose to remain in China, expressing their trust in the care provided by the government (MOE, 2020c). The Chinese embassy in Ghana's (2020) direct response to the allegations is another illustrative example:

'Recently, some African countries, including Ghana, expressed their concerns of some Africans citizens in Guangdong Province. The Chinese side attaches great importance and quickly began the investigation. It is important to note that China has been upholding the position and policy that all foreigners are treated equally. However, some medias are exaggerating the situation and driving a wedge between China and Africa by interpreting the occasional incidents and misunderstandings as China treats Africans in a discrimination way, which has gone far beyond its original appearance' (para 3).

Also observed is the expectation for foreign students in China to play an ambassadorial role – notable in Xi's message to international students at Peking University

to 'deepen their understanding of the real China and, at the same time, share their thoughts and experiences with more people to promote mutual understanding among peoples of all countries' (MOE, 2021, para 4).

In other words, the challenges presented by the pandemic, plus the worsening geopolitical tensions with Western societies have become justifications for the state to enhance *politics of control* at the national level. The study warnings, letters, and political speeches exemplify a growing form of political action aimed at shaping what Squire (2010) terms the *politics of migration*, influencing domestic students' perceptions of foreign countries and their transnational mobility while emphasizing political values of harmony and benevolence to encourage international students to act as cultural ambassadors, thereby masking and swiftly dismissing dissent or dissatisfaction with mobility control and social injustice.

Setting the Scene: UAE

The UAE, an emerging international HE hub, hosts one of the largest numbers of international degree providers (Rensimer, 2021), inviting universities to establish branch campuses and degree programs to enhance global competitiveness and build a knowledge-based society (Ashour, 2024; Karabchuk et al., 2021). Within the HE sector, there is a two-track system (Lee, 2021). The first, which is comprised of three federal government institutions, provides access to HE to primarily Emirati citizens. Operating at a national level through branches in different emirates, they account for about 30% of total student tertiary enrolment, of which Emirati citizens make up more than 90% of the federal institutions' student body (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2017). The second track, comprised of non-federal private or semi-private institutions, primarily caters to a large expatriate population who grew up in the UAE and seeks to attract international students to study in the UAE. These institutions account for about 70% of total tertiary enrolment in the UAE, of which Emirati citizens make up about 10% of the student body. These institutions can be further subdivided into two broad categories. The first category comprises branch campuses (e.g., New York University Abu Dhabi), which are joint ventures heavily funded by the government and draw international students who come from abroad. These universities are considered more prestigious and tend to offer generous, competitive scholarships to attract highly talented international students from around the world (Austin et al., 2014; Vora, 2013). The second comprises branch campuses that are located in free zones and operate under a for-profit model that relies on locally based expatriate students who grew up in the UAE and consider the UAE home and international students, mostly from India, Russia, China, and Pakistan, who come to the UAE for HE (Karabchuk et al., 2021; KHDA Dubai, 2024).

Across the different HEIs, there are three main groups of HE students in the UAE: Emirati citizens (approx. 27%), locally based expatriate students (approx. 43%), and international students who come to the UAE for their university degree (approx. 30%). The high proportion of non-citizen enrolment and non-federal institutions in UAE's HE system indicates that the UAE relies on expatriate academic

staff and students to sustain its growing HE system (Austin et al., 2014; Karabchuk et al., 2021; Vora, 2013).

Politicization of ISM in the (post)COVID era: UAE

The UAE's response to COVID-19 enacted a *politics of control* that shaped the experiences of students based on their nationality and institutional affiliations, highlighting systemic inequalities within its HE system. In 2020, the government required Emirati students studying abroad on national scholarships to return and continue their studies remotely (UAE Supreme Council for National Security, 2020). For non-Emirati students, automatic visa extensions allowed them to remain in the UAE and live in university accommodations, ensuring continuity for the HE sector (Clarke, 2020; Karabchuk & Shomotova, 2022). However, this facilitation was accompanied by a conspicuous lack of financial support for private and semi-private universities, which predominantly rely on tuition fees from non-Emirati students. The government neither provided financial aid to buffer these institutions against COVID-related challenges (Erfurth & Ridge, 2020; Ashour et al., 2021) nor issued mandates to reduce or waive tuition fees for students (Alterri et al., 2020). This lack of support disproportionately affected the children of 'permanently temporary' expatriates—non-Emirati residents without paths to permanent residency or citizenship, who often rely on employer sponsorship for visas, face economic precarity, and come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than other international students (Thiollet & Assaf, 2020; Vora, 2013). Thus, while the open-door policies facilitated the mobility of students from outside the UAE, striving to ensure the financial viability of the HE sector and, by extension, the national economy, they simultaneously ignored the needs of the most vulnerable students. These 'permanently temporary' expatriates, who often consider the UAE their home, were left without national financial aid or tuition relief, reflecting a policy framework prioritizing economic imperatives over social justice.

Most branch campuses in Dubai are located in free zones and operate under a for-profit model that rely on both locally-based 'permanently temporary' expatriate students and international students from abroad. The onset of COVID-19 meant that half of the student base from whom these Dubai-based universities were garnering tuition fees disappeared, leading to financial pressures. Such pressures led to a *politics of migration* in which many Dubai-based branch campuses scrambled to adapt and to locate new student markets. Many universities such as the Middlesex University in Dubai, began focusing their recruitment efforts on the 'permanently temporary' expatriate students who had planned to study outside the UAE, including at institutions in their home country (e.g. India, Pakistan, Egypt). However, as these 'domestic' students tend to be of a lower socioeconomic background, to attract these students, Middlesex University in Dubai provided graduates of UAE high schools with a 15 percent tuition discount, with high-achieving applicants eligible for a 50 percent discount (Rizvi, 2021). Universities such as Murdoch University in Dubai and Heriot-Watt University Dubai also established hardship funds and offered tuition discounts to maintain enrolment. Financial incentives extended to

local 'permanently temporary' expatriate students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., mostly from South Asia and Southeast Asia), by the branch campuses reflect a reactive, market-based approach towards social justice. This approach, contingent upon the institutions' economic exigencies, underscores a broader systemic issue within the UAE's ISM framework—a bifurcated HE system that differently serves national and non-national populations.

Thus, whereas COVID-19 restricted international mobility and choice for many, the reduced fees facilitated mobility choices for these groups of 'permanently temporary' students in the UAE, enabling access to study 'abroad' in Western universities from 'home,' their host country often from birth or childhood.[4] In other words, the reduced barrier to entry for these students due to financial needs of the branch campuses during COVID-19 provided greater international mobility to students who may not have been able to afford full-time study in the UAE, UK, Australia, or the US, with implications for post-graduation employability. The financial incentives offered to domestic 'permanently temporary' expatriate students, while beneficial to some, also reflect a reactive rather than a proactive approach to equity in mobility, contingent on the economic needs of the institutions rather than a commitment to access to education.

In late 2020 and early 2021, the UAE government extended the 'golden visa' scheme, a form of *politics of control* designed to selectively facilitate mobility. This program offered high-performing students a conditional pathway to stability, allowing them to remain in the UAE for at least ten years without employer sponsorship and to sponsor their families if they could provide health insurance and financial support (The National, 2021; WAM, 2022). While the policy expanded opportunities for academically and financially privileged students, it excluded many 'permanently temporary' expatriates who lacked the necessary resources or qualifications. For students who had lived their entire lives in the UAE, the golden visa presented a conditional chance at stability, contingent on academic achievement and financial independence. In essence, the terms of inclusion for those permitted to stay beyond their studies as international students or graduates were tied to the political priorities of the state, particularly its focus on national development and human capital strategies (Ewers et al., 2021; Janardhan, 2022; Osmandzikovic, 2023). While similar to policies in Canada and the UK, the UAE's golden visa scheme is distinct in applying to individuals who may have resided in the country their entire lives yet face limited, if any, pathways to residency or citizenship. This highlights the deeply conditional and selective nature of mobility within the UAE's HE context.

From a policy perspective, these changes to visa and residency rules to incentivize international students to come to the UAE and stay came as a part of broader efforts of the UAE government to attract and retain talent to spur economic activity and increase the country's global competitiveness. The main target audience for

[4] Lack of data availability poses challenges to providing statistics on the number or percentage of students who were able to enroll in these international branch campuses in Dubai as a result of the tuition discounts. It is also uncertain the extent to which these discounts continued after COVID-19 and the extent they may have influenced the students' ability to remain enrolled.

these visa schemes appear to be wealthier individuals who are coming to the UAE to study in these branch campuses and not the children of 'permanently temporary' expatriates. Nonetheless, these schemes, alongside reduced tuition fees, provided an opportunity for these students, who tend to be more marginalized than their counterparts (Vora, 2013), not only to have expanded HE choices and increased mobility but also a chance at having a sense of greater permanence and less precarity in the UAE. Thus, the UAE's introduction of the 'golden visa' scheme, marks a selective approach to mobility, privileging students based on academic merit and economic means. While offering stability and potential permanence for some, this scheme further highlights the conditional nature of mobility within the UAE, aligning with the state's broader objectives of talent retention, economic advancement, and control of its population.

Politicized ISM in the post-COVID Era

We delved into the politicization of ISM in Israel, China, and the UAE amidst the global crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that the pandemic has not only amplified pre-existing political tensions and inequalities but has also foregrounded the critical role of politics in shaping the contours of ISM, challenging depoliticized, economically-focused narratives that have dominated the discourse since the 1990s (Bamberger & Morris, 2024). Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic serve as powerful lenses, magnifying the organizing principles of societies and exposing the values and priorities underpinning mobility governance. Far from disrupting political logics, crises may reinforce them, as states leverage crises to advance pre-existing agendas. The selective border reopening in Israel, the UAE's expansion of its golden visa scheme, and China's intensified regulation of international student flows are emblematic of this trend. Such measures illustrate how ISM policies are deeply embedded in local political logics, reflecting broader struggles over national identity, economic priorities, and geopolitical positioning. This aligns with observations from international organizations during the pandemic, which leveraged the crisis to promote long-standing initiatives like digital transformation and skill-building (Kim, 2024; Morris et al., 2022).

The pandemic also revealed the adaptability of ISM governance. In Israel, the *politics of control*, exemplified by initial border closures, encountered fierce and differentiated *politics of migration*. Advocacy from educational and religious institutions successfully influenced a revision of control policies, resulting in selective border openness. Similarly, the UAE's private universities pivoted their recruitment strategies toward domestic 'permanently temporary' expatriates, introducing tuition discounts and hardship funds that, while economically motivated, expanded access for marginalized populations. These examples underscore ISM as a fluid and temporal process shaped by negotiation, contestation, and the dynamic interplay between control and migration.

By applying Squire's (2010) framework of the politics of control and migration, we reveal ISM as a contested space where state strategies, institutional practices, and individual agency intersect. Control and migration are not discrete

categories but interdependent processes that shape mobility governance through a dynamic interplay of resistance, adaptation, and negotiation. Crises like the COVID-19 pandemic magnify these tensions, exposing the political logics underlying control measures such as border closures and selective entry policies, which are often rooted in broader societal struggles over national identity, economic priorities, and the secular-religious divide. The differentiation of international students (e.g., university versus yeshiva students; 'international students' versus 'permanently temporary expatriates') illustrates how these control mechanisms reflect deeper political priorities. Yet, migration politics—manifested through lobbying, advocacy, and adaptation—acts as a counterforce. Efforts by educational and religious institutions in Israel to revise border policies, or the adaptive strategies of UAE branch campuses to accommodate domestic expatriates, highlight how diverse actors contest and reshape state controls.

These dynamics vary significantly across governance systems, as highlighted in our comparative cases. In democratic contexts like Israel, public resistance and advocacy are more visible, while in authoritarian regimes such as China and the UAE, migration politics manifest through institutional adaptation within tightly controlled frameworks. These variations underscore the need for expanded research on migration politics across diverse governance systems, particularly as ISM increasingly shifts toward authoritarian states (Glass & Cruz, 2023). Future case studies could illuminate how migration politics operate in environments with limited public advocacy but where institutional and individual agency still influence policy outcomes.

This study reframes ISM as a contested and politicized field, shaped by the interplay of state power, institutional strategies, and individual agency. The pandemic not only reinforced existing inequalities but also illuminated the critical role of politics in mobility governance, exposing both entrenched inequities and opportunities for intervention. From the privileging of religious and national groups in Israel to the marginalization of 'permanently temporary' expatriates in the UAE and discriminatory practices in China, ISM emerges as a site of power that perpetuates and reshapes social hierarchies. As migration is increasingly politicized in democracies around the world, geopolitical tensions rise and ISM increasingly shifts toward authoritarian contexts, the dynamics of control and migration become even more salient, demanding heightened scrutiny of the values and priorities underpinning mobility policies and their implications for inequality and social justice. Our analysis underscores ISM as a dynamic, co-constitutive, and temporal process—a locus of power and contestation where states, institutions, and individuals negotiate competing interests. By highlighting these processes, particularly in contexts outside of the traditional Anglophone and European ISM destinations, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of ISM's political dimensions, offering critical insights for advancing equity and inclusion in global HE.

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Authors and Affiliations

Annette Bamberger[1] · Min Ji Kim[2] · Seungah Sarah Lee[3] · Fei Yan[4]

✉ Annette Bamberger
annette.bamberger@biu.ac.il

Min Ji Kim
evelyn.kim.15@ucl.ac.uk

Seungah Sarah Lee
lees@hec.fr

Fei Yan
fei.yan.14@alumni.ucl.ac.uk

[1] Faculty of Education, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

[2] UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

[3] HEC Paris, Doha, Qatar

[4] Independent Scholar, Hong Kong, China