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Partial, hierarchical and stratified space? Understanding 'the international' in studies of international student mobility

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ABSTRACT
This paper analyses the way in which 'international' is mobilised in relation to international student mobility (ISM), focusing on three areas in particular: its role in motivating students to undertake ISM; how it shapes experiences of ISM; and, finally, how conceptions of the international influence the impacts of ISM (in terms of students' identities and labour market outcomes – the dominant themes within the extant literature). It argues that particular ideas of 'the international' determine where students choose to study and how those destinations are framed and positioned hierarchically. Similar ideas also underpin students' experiences of ISM, with social class and family background playing an important additional role. The impacts of ISM are also related to conceptions of 'the international': students' post-study identities were seen as 'international' but also 'transnational', ethnic, religious or racially constructed. Finally, we show how an 'international' degree is seen as a valuable commodity in many labour markets, but that the literature paints a more nuanced picture, where such qualifications are valued in particular employment sectors, attached to particular countries and not, as might be assumed, universally valorised. Furthermore, conceptions of an 'international career' are predictably limited and proxy for Anglophone countries located in the Global North.

KEYWORDS
international student mobility; higher education; students; space

Introduction

It is now widely recognised and largely assumed that accessing higher education involves some sort of travel on the part of the student. As Finn and Holton (2019) have argued: 'Higher education as a global entity has undergone dramatic changes'; 'these changes have played out most significantly in relation to student mobilities, which have seen fundamental shifts in the ways students move at a range of spatial scales' (p. 1). Whilst many students 'commute' to their local university, an increasing number move nationally, regionally and internationally for education (Waters & Brooks, 2021). In this paper, we focus on a particular aspect of – and perspective on – such mobilities: *international student mobility* (or ISM). Over the past two decades, research within the social sciences on ISM has burgeoned (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Waters & Brooks, 2021) just as the number of internationally mobile

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students at tertiary level[1] has, conterminously, continued to increase year-on-year (to over 5.5 million; OECD, 2020). Research in this area increasingly reflects the fact that international student mobility has become a pressing policy issue for many governments around the world concerned with bolstering a knowledge-based economy (Robertson, 2013; Yang, 2016). It has also sought to understand how students experience international mobility, in terms of their shifting identities, for example (Ghosh & Wang, 2003) – and what the implications of international mobility are for students and their families (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2022). Interestingly, however, relatively little time has been spent analysing the meanings and implications of the specifically *international* nature of this mobility. The term 'international' within ISM is usually taken
for granted and assumed to speak for itself – its meaning intuited. However, and as we argue in this paper, 'the international' does not have one, straightforward and universally understood meaning. Rather, it is mobilised within the literature in different ways: for example, as we go on to show, the international can indicate engagement with a rather narrow and circumscribed set of countries or 'destinations'. Consequently, this paper is principally concerned with the question – what does the 'international' represent within international student mobility? We draw on an extensive body of social science scholarship on this topic to address some of the issues to which this question alludes, attempting a broader and more thorough analysis of this concept than has been undertaken by researchers to date. We undertook a comprehensive review of research published in the English language across the disciplines of sociology, human geography, political science and educational studies.

A handful of researchers have grappled with identifying the parameters of 'the international' within ISM (e.g. Raghuram, 2013; Spangler and Adriansen, 2021 Waters & Brooks, 2011). Outlining the focus of a special issue on the subject of ISM, King and Raghuram (2013) make the following observations about the meaning(s) of the 'international': '"International" in the context of ISM is usually used to define migration across nation-states … However, the emergence of other spatial units such as "global cities" in attracting students is becoming increasingly apparent (Raghuram, 2013). … ' (p. 130). In other words, they suggest that within ISM, alternative scales and registers have become important, and that mobility to cities *rather than countries*, for example, may be seen as a key 'feature' of what we think of as *international* student mobility. Furthermore, restricting definitions of 'the international' to 'migration across nation-states' fails to acknowledge the discursive work that 'international' does in, for example, motivating students to study abroad or in their employment outcomes (where 'international' qualifications are rewarded and an 'international career' path is sought; Lee, 2021).

Some researchers have suggested that the 'international' represents more complex ideas of home or evokes the transformative potential of student mobilities in fostering a sense of a 'wider world' (existing in spaces located above and transcending the national frame) (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Madge et al. (2015), for example, have argued for the 're-spatialisation' of international higher education, that emphasises the 'multiple geographies' of international study. Their subsequent 'deconstruction' of 'the international' leads them to argue for:

> 'a more distributed, unsettled and decentred view . . . that starts to develop multicentred, multi-scalar spatial imaginations . . . We can [then] start to reveal *an expanded notion of the international*, moving from (largely unmarked) European-American-Australian centres towards a version that explicitly resituates itself as coming out of multiple locations' (p. 684, emphasis added).

As they suggest, 'the international' within ISM has habitually valorised particular parts of the world as *centres* in the production of knowledge, at the expense of others. Europe, North America and Australasia are assumed to represent 'international' spaces, not least because of the pre-eminent role of English as 'lingua Franca'. The 'ambivalence' of English (and how it becomes equated with 'international') is described eloquently by Saarinen and Ennser-Kananen (2020):

> Academic communities . . . use English in settings that are often labelled 'international' . . . A research meeting with seven colleagues, originally coming from four different countries, with four different first languages, can be labelled as 'international' and 'local' at the same time . . . .The paradox of internationalisation . . . is that it can lead both to an increased diversity of perspectives and a narrowing Westernisation and Anglicisation of higher education at the same time. (p. 117)

Thus, describing something as 'international' in the context of student mobility can have competing connotations, representing both a 'narrowing' geographical scope (around particular countries and regions) and, at the same time, indicating a potential diversifying of perspectives (such as the involvement of individuals emanating from multiple nation-states).

In this paper, we explore such competing connotations of 'the international'. Our argument is based on a critical reading of the extant academic literature (drawing largely from our own and cognate disciplines of sociology, education and human geography) and is structured around three main foci: student/familial decision-making vis-a-vis international mobility; students' experiences whilst abroad; and, finally, the impacts of international study. We chose these foci as they represent three of the key topics addressed by the extant literature – as well as three important elements of international students' experiences. (We acknowledge, however, that not all literature will be covered by this approach – for example, that which has focussed more on the perspectives of policy actors and teaching staff.) For each theme, we will analyse how ideas relating to 'the international', specifically, emerge from and help shape debates within the academic literature as well as the function that 'international' plays in different contexts.

Motivations and decision-making

In their work on higher education decision-making in the UK, Reay et al. (2005) have contended that various 'circuits' can be identified, with some students choosing within a largely local group of universities, others deciding between institutions in the same region, and others looking further afield and making their choices within a national frame. As we have argued previously (Brooks & Waters, 2009), there is now evidence that some students – and typically, although not exclusively, those from more advantaged backgrounds – are choosing within an *international* circuit. In this section, we

examine the nature of this: we first consider the particular geographies associated with the international circuit, before exploring the ways in which this 'international space' is becoming increasingly stratified, as the demographic profile of mobile students begins to shift.

Circumscribed geographies of movement

There is now a relatively large literature on the reasons that students move across national borders for their higher education and on their decision-making processes; indeed, this has been one of the most popular topic areas in ISM (e.g. Chankseliani, 2016; Guth & Gill, 2008; Sin, 2009). Scholars have explored how individual students and their families go about making study abroad choices, and how these are informed by wider factors including class relations (e.g. the use of ISM to secure or consolidate familial social reproduction), employment prospects, and colonial legacies (e.g. the ways in which qualifications from former colonial powers are still valued particularly highly in many parts of the world). This body of work has, however, tended to focus on movement from 'East' to 'West' – and typically to Anglophone nations of the Global North. It has thus been far from 'international' in its reach.

Examples of key studies in this area include Fong's (2011) analysis of the mobility of students from China to a wide range of 'Western' nations; Ma's (2020) more recent work on similar trajectories from China to the US; and Sidhu's (2006) exploration of the marketing strategies used by government and universities in Australia, the US and the UK to attract students from the Global South. Even when scholarship has explored ISM *from* the West, it has typically focussed on a relatively small range of destination countries – either within the European Union's Erasmus mobility scheme (see, for example, Cairns et al., 2018; Van Mol, 2014) or to Anglophone nations such as the US, Canada and Australia (Brooks & Waters, 2009; Gaulter & Mountford-Zimdars, 2018). To some extent, these particular geographies that are highlighted in the literature reflect actual patterns in the movement of international students – countries such as the US, UK and Australia have remained some of the most popular destinations for whole degree mobility for a considerable period of time.

However, they can also have the effect of obscuring other geographies of ISM, and reifying hegemonic relationships between nation-states. Indeed, Mulvey (2021) has argued that much ISM research tends to reproduce Western-centric perspectives and binary frameworks that are, in practice, increasingly being challenged within post-colonial geography, including by his own work on the mobility of students from Africa to China. There is, certainly, a growing number of studies that pay attention to these new geographies of movement. For example, Sidhu et al. (2020) have explored the rise of 'Asian regionalism' and how this has aimed to encourage students to circulate *within* Asia; Kondakci et al. (2018) have demonstrated the important role 'regional hubs' can play in facilitating intra-regional student mobility; and Yang (2018) has examined mobility from China to Singapore and from India to China. Moreover, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2015) has provided a compelling (if atypical) case study of South-to-South migration, showing how both Cuba and Libya have offered free

education to young people (as well as older adults) from refugee camps in Lebanon and the Algerian desert. Nevertheless, the majority of scholarship across the disciplines of education, sociology and geography still pays relatively little attention to these shifting patterns, and thus often serves to reproduce a very circumscribed definition of 'international' student mobility.[2]

Increasingly diverse but stratified space

Typically, the 'international space' that is described in much of the literature on ISM is portrayed as an exclusive space – one that is inhabited primarily by the affluent, those with sufficient cultural, economic and social resources to countenance and then support a period abroad. Indeed, as noted above, one of the key ways in which ISM has been theorised is in terms of social and cultural reproduction, that is the processes through which privileged groups in society have taken action to protect their advantage and ensure it is passed on to the next generation (Cranston et al., 2020; Waters, 2006). For example, previous research we have conducted has shown how whole degree mobility from the UK is taken up by highly privileged individuals, who have attended top fee-paying secondary schools, often because they have failed to secure access to Oxford or Cambridge (Brooks & Waters, 2009).

However, there is now some indication of the 'opening up' of spaces of ISM to a wider group of students. Scholarship from different parts of the world has indicated that mobility is increasingly undertaken not only by those from the upper middle classes; students from lower middle class and even working class backgrounds sometimes pursue an overseas education (Gaulter and Mountford-Zimdars, 2018; Lipura & Collins, 2020). This has been facilitated by changes in both supply- and demand-side factors. With respect to the former, many universities spend considerable resources marketing themselves (sometimes quite aggressively) to prospective students (Findlay et al., 2017), in some cases using in-country agents to reach larger and more socially diverse populations (Beech, 2018). In various nations, migration policies have also been influential – in encouraging the mobility of lower-skilled individuals to pursue vocational courses to fill particular labour market gaps (Robertson, 2013) or tightening up non-education-related migration routes and thus encouraging a wider group of people to consider study abroad as a first step towards immigration (Luthra & Platt, 2016). Demand has also increased as more middle- and lower-income families have come to see international student mobility as a means of achieving or solidifying social mobility (e.g. Sancho, 2017). Moreover, international travel has become cheaper, and it is now easier for students to stay in close contact with families whilst abroad (through social media and online conferencing) (Lee, 2020). In some nations, such as China, there is also evidence that studying abroad has become normalised, such that it is widely taken up across the social spectrum, even if significant financial sacrifices are required (Fong, 2011). The changing demographics of mobile students have been evident, for example, in the profile of UK students taking part in the European Union's Erasmus scheme – to some extent as a result of the introduction of paid work placements (for higher education students) alongside traditional study opportunities (Deakin, 2014).

However, recent scholarship has also indicated that alongside this opening up of the international space to students from a wider range of backgrounds has been an increasing *stratification* of this space. Writing with respect to Irish students engaging in credit mobility, Courtois (2018) has shown that while students from less advantaged families have become more likely to participate (not least due to the challenging targets for outward mobility agreed between universities and the Irish government), they are also more likely to be found at less prestigious foreign universities. Similarly, discussing Chinese students who move to the US, Ma (2020) has contended that although we have witnessed a widening of participation, with students from lower socio-economic groups better represented among the body of mobile students, those without parental experience of higher education tend to be found at lower status colleges and universities. Thus, although the international space, with regard to ISM, can be seen as increasingly open to students from a wider range of social backgrounds, it is also an increasingly *socially stratified* space. One of the goals in unpacking the meaning of the international is, thus, to highlight how this space is experienced differentially.

Experiences whilst abroad

Clearly, students' experiences whilst abroad can be wide and varied. In this section, however, we focus on those that relate directly to understandings of 'the international' – and, to prevent repetition, leave discussion of the impact of study abroad on students' identities (national and/or international) to the subsequent section.

Circumscribed geographies of mobility

When we consider the experiences of students during their studies abroad, we can see some similar patterns emerging to those described above. Despite some notable exceptions (e.g. Mulvey, 2020; Jon, 2012; Yang, 2018), the vast majority of scholarship in this area focuses on international students in 'Western' Anglophone universities, and often only on those who have travelled to such locations from the 'East'. This is particularly evident within the discipline of education (more so than geography or sociology), where a very high proportion of the literature has, to date, focussed on the classroom experiences of international students from China and other East Asian nations (e.g. Huang & Turner, 2018; Ma, 2020). To some extent, this mirrors historical patterns of movement with – as noted above – relatively large numbers of students moving from East Asia to the US, UK and Australia. However, the near-absence of studies of the academic and social experiences of students from other countries moving to diverse parts of the world has the effect of reifying East to West mobility. Very circumscribed geographies of mobility are again evident, with research often not very 'international' in its focus.

Construction of a 'home' and 'international' binary

A substantial body of work has shown how, for many students, being categorised as 'international' often serves to mark difference, separating them from 'domestic' students and justifying differential treatment. International students are often, for example, housed in separate accommodation blocks – which can make it more difficult for them to get to

know 'home' students, as well as reinforce their sense of 'otherness' on campus (Fincher & Shaw, 2009). The charging of differential fees is also justified on the basis of the distinction of the two groups. Although international and home students typically sit in the same classroom, follow the same curriculum and have the same resources spent on them by their university, the former often pay significantly more for the experience. While such differentials are perhaps most marked in countries where relatively high fees are paid by all students (in the UK, international students can often pay at least £10,000 per year more than home students), they are also evident in other nations. Indeed, Plamper and Jauhiainen (2021) have argued that in Finland, where fees are payable only by international students, not their domestic counterparts, fee-paying is associated with feeling like a 'second class citizen' in the classroom, with international students frequently positioning themselves as 'restricted participants'. While such fee differentials are common across the world (but by no means universal), the inequities they represent are rarely discussed (Raghuram et al., 2020). Indeed, in the UK, the National Union of Students has campaigned on the behalf of international students – not for the removal of fee differentials – but merely for an end to the practice of increasing international fees during a course of study (Tannock, 2018). Alongside fee differentials, international students are also sometimes subject to very different practices within their higher education institutions. In the UK, for example, because of immigration requirements, international students have had to be monitored – to check that they are attending classes on a regular basis and are thus bona fide students – in ways not required of 'home students' (Yuval Davis et al., 2019; see also, O'Connor (2018) with respect to Ireland). Yuval Davis et al. (2019) consider this to be part of broader processes of 'everyday bordering' that have been rolled out across the country and which have required a wide variety of individuals, including HE staff, to take on responsibility for securing the UK national border.

Such examples feed into wider critiques that, through the binary established between international students and their peers, the former group are 'othered'. In this way, 'international' comes to be understood as 'less than national'. While national students frequently have means of seeking redress for poor treatment, not least through the electoral system, this is not an option for international students. Moreover, equality measures, within the higher education sector and elsewhere, tend to be framed in relation to the participation of 'home' students only – with targets relating to increasing the participation of those from lower-income families and minority ethnic backgrounds, for example, focussing primarily on those with citizenship of the nation-state in question (Brown & Tannock, 2009; Naidoo, 2003). International students thus often end up as not fully protected as citizens by either their country of origin (as they are no longer living there) or the country in which they are studying (Marginson, 2012).

Hierarchical positioning of international students

It is, however, not always the case that international students are homogenised in the ways discussed above. Indeed, there is evidence that in policy, practice and also, sometimes, in academic scholarship, distinctions are drawn between, on the one hand, 'good' and desirable international students and, on the other hand, those who are in some ways considered to be problematic and thus less desirable. Lomer (2017) argues that international students are represented in a range of ways within UK policy: as ambassadors

(related to assertions that they often exercise 'soft power', to the UK's benefit, on return home, and concerns about decline in the nation's global influence); as educational resources (in terms of the diversity that they bring to UK higher education classrooms); as in cultural deficit (referring to, for example, their supposed passivity in classrooms); as financial resources (for ensuring the feasibility of courses that tend to be unpopular among UK nationals, and for shoring up UK HEIs more generally); and as migrants (related to a broader UK context in which immigration is seen by many as a serious social problem) (see also, Brooks, 2018; Findlay et al., 2017). More generally, Tannock (2018) argues that international students are commonly positioned as either 'academic elites' (similar to the concept of a 'model minority' (Nguyen et al., 2019)) or 'struggling foreigners'. Both are unhelpful. The former can erase the experiences of those whose attainment is less impressive and may need considerable support with their learning. The latter can lead to assumptions that there is little point discussing international students as part of debates about equality of attainment levels, 'because we already know that, of course, international students are destined to have lower levels of attainment than home students, precisely because they are foreign students' (Tannock, 2018, p. 193), and also to discriminatory attitudes towards individual students. Indeed, one of the participants in Tannock's research observed that 'The ridiculousness of the whole treatment of international students is that your intellectual ability is constantly challenged. . .. Because the presumption is that you're just dumb, right? You're not English speaking, you're dumb' (p. 194). The 'struggling foreigner' discourse is not, however, applied to all international students equally, and tends to be associated primarily with those from East Asian countries, and often linked to the perceived problems they experience with respect to citation, oral participation and critical thinking (Song, 2016; Song & Mccarthy, 2018).

This differentiation of international students by country of origin has been documented in many different parts of the world. For example, drawing on her work in Ireland, O'Connor (2018) demonstrates how university staff perceived the on-campus 'clustering' of only certain national groups as problematic. They tended to be very critical of such behaviour from students from China and Malaysia, but did not extend the same critique to international students from Western nations who, O'Connor argues, were equally likely to stick to national groups rather than mix with the local population. She explains this difference in terms of racism, arguing that: 'This is an example of how the categorisation of students by the university can reinforce a distinctly racialised discourse that problematises the presence of Malaysians as a group whose relations with others set them apart and require active management, while White Western students are free to make their own choices of who[m] to socialise or live with' (p. 348).

Jon's (2012) research in South Korea shows similarly the impact of national background – in this case, with respect to interactions between students themselves. She demonstrates how international students from Western Europe typically had higher status in South Korean university classrooms than the 'home' students. In contrast, however, those from other Asian countries were viewed much less positively, and often had lower status within the student population than both those from Western countries and from South Korea itself. This hierarchical positioning is underpinned, Jon suggests, by rankings of countries on the basis of their perceived degree of 'development' and also in terms of language – the Korean students in her research had a preference for international

students who spoke English (a language associated primarily with the 'West'). She argues that these behaviours should be understood as a form of neo-racism, where discrimination operates on the basis of nationality and culture rather than physical difference alone. In these various accounts, there is strong evidence that, across different national contexts, international students are hierarchically positioned – by higher education staff as well as, in some cases, by fellow students. Moreover, the type of differentiated 'global imaginary' described by Stein and de Andreotti (2015) appears to underpin this positioning, in which the West is understood to be at the top of a global hierarchy 'with the rest of the world trailing behind' (p. 226).

International students are positioned hierarchically, not only however by their country of origin. Social class and family background are also significant. Indeed, Courtois' (2018) analysis of the experiences of Irish students undertaking credit mobility shows how those from less privileged social groups were less likely than their peers to have accessed programmes of high academic quality – where there was a good match between the courses in their 'home' institution and those they were studying abroad, and frequent contact with academic staff from the home institution was maintained. Instead, she asserts that they were more likely to be found in programmes with more of a 'gap year' format – with relatively little integration with their degree course. Similar points are made with respect to whole degree mobility in Yang's (2018) comparative study of student mobility from India to China and from China to Singapore. Focussing on the Indian students in particular, he argues that, while the profile of mobile individuals has shifted to include those from less wealthy families, such students are typically found on less rigorous courses with poorer employment outcomes.

As well as educational experience being patterned by social class, research has also outlined the ways in which the everyday encounters of international students are frequently differentiated along similar lines. For example, writing with respect to Australia, Robertson (2013) shows how when the profile of international students became more socially diverse – because of national policies instigated in 2004–05 to open up more vocational courses to mobile students, with the intention of addressing particular shortages within the labour market – the treatment of them changed. While previously, students following more academically-focussed courses were typically seen as 'ideal neoliberal subjects', students who came to study vocational programmes – typically from lower social class backgrounds – were often subject to racism and other forms of discrimination. In some cases, this led to violence and even death (see also, Baas, 2014).

Thus, the literature on the experiences of mobile students, whilst abroad, also points to the hierarchical nature of the 'international space' and the hierarchical positioning of those who move within it, in ways similar to those articulated in the previous section on decision-making processes and destinations.

Subsequent impacts of 'international' study on students

Research on the impacts of international student mobility has, until recently, discussed a similar circumscribed and limited geography of movement – overwhelmingly focussing on migration from countries located in the Global South to countries in the Global North (e.g. Waters, 2005; Sin, 2013); or between countries within the Global North (e.g. Murphy-

Lejeune, 2002; Van Mol, 2014). Although there has been some discussion of the 'macro' level impacts of ISM (on particular countries – for example, see, Chankseliani (2018), who has discussed the 'democratic development' of countries in relation to where outbound students choose to study), here we focus on outcomes for the students themselves. In relation to this, the discussion has tended to revolve around the question: how have students from country A fared in the labour market after a period studying in country B? A particular conceptualisation of 'the national' has consequently framed the discussion (e.g. King and Raghuram, 2013). Nevertheless, we can also identify research where the international is differently conceived – for example, Van Mol's (2014) depiction of how a 'European' identity amongst students is fostered by intra-European educational mobility suggests that individual states (countries) are less directly important (see, also King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003). Notwithstanding this, in what follows we consider how 'the international' has been represented in discussions of ISM where the focus has been primarily on the outcomes of mobility in relation to: student identities, on the one hand, and students' subsequent employment experiences on the other.

International study and geographical identities

Research has sought to evaluate the extent to which ISM promotes an 'international' identity and, in addition, what an 'international' identity looks like for the students/graduates concerned. Often, such identities turn out to be multi-scalar and multi-sited and rarely attach to particular nation-states. Transnational identities might be a more appropriate term, reflecting the fact that many international students develop a sense of self that transcends national boundaries (Waters & Brooks, 2011). Other research has described these new identities (developed through international study) in terms of 'cosmopolitanism' (Lee, 2020), 'becoming' (Tran, 2016) or 'self-formation' (Marginson, 2014). All of these ideas evoke a sense of identity that is *more than* 'international' (if we take international to mean between two or more nation-states) and does not rely on or fall back upon 'national' descriptors.

Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) work suggests that alternative imaginaries are constructed through a period of overseas study. Of international students, she has written: 'Their world is . . . expanding, open . . .' (p. 227); and the experience of being abroad 'places students in an intensely formative situation. However, adapting does not mean changing one's identity but, rather adopting and accepting the "local colour", like the chameleon, so as to fit harmoniously with the environment' (p. 226). This can result in what seems to be an 'international' form of identity, in the sense that it is unbounded by students' national origins:

> [International students] question the notion of borders and the meaning of home. Their travels have no final destination and . . . Places are just locations where one can work, live and love . . . Home becomes one's languages and friends, a house one carries around as a portable commodity. From places to faces, home is where interactions and conversations with different others are within reach. (p. 234)

Thus, ISM can lead to identities that are markedly *less* bounded in any way, whether to the nation-state or to a particular domestic situation.

Experiences of ISM have also led some students subsequently to identify primarily with an ethnic, religious or racial categorisation (rather than a national or territorially bounded one). This is especially true in cases where students have been exposed to racism or suffered discrimination of some sort. In one study of international students in the UK by Brown and Jones (2013), one-third of their sample of 150 postgraduate students experienced some form of racism. The impact of this abuse was significant: 'in many cases, the encounter with racism led to behavioural change and left negative impressions of the host country' (p. 1016). In another example, Mulvey (2020) examined the experiences of Ugandan students studying in China. Many reported what they described as 'anti-African discrimination' that manifested as racism. This often led students subsequently to identify as African, downplaying the significance of their nationality whilst asserting a regional and often racialised categorisation.

Another important reflection on the notion of ('international') forms of identification has been provided by Van Mol (2014), who notes the enduring impact of *national* frames of reference upon whether a student will develop a sense of 'European identity'. A number of different factors influence this process, including the historical presence of their home country within the EU and the extent to which Europe has been visible in their daily lives. Consequently, it is not simply interactions during a student's time abroad that dictate identity formation, but also the context within which they have been socialised – only when these are favourable towards European integration does structural identification with this supranational entity take place. King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003) similarly caution against drawing too strong a link between students' experience of the year abroad and their propensity to identify with a European identity, noting the importance of 'prior socialisation' (i.e. family-mediated experiences). Thus, the 'national' mediates understandings of the 'international' for young people in these studies.

The international in subsequent employment experiences

A particular notion of the 'international' can be advantageous when it comes to students' subsequent careers. Having an 'international degree' or 'international qualification' (not to mention international experience) can undoubtedly open doors for recent graduates seeking employment. Furthermore, some students educated abroad can be seen to aspire to an 'international career' (Findlay et al., 2012; Lee, 2021). Here, we consider what international means in the context of job-seeking and employment outcomes.

In some contexts, employers have been seen to favour 'international' graduates (those in possession of international academic credentials) over and above local or domestically educated graduates (Waters, 2006, 2008; Rizvi, 2000). For example, in the context of Hong Kong, employers in private sector industries (especially banking) elevated 'overseas-educated' graduates in their recruitment process. They were said to value 'international' attributes like language proficiency (English) and a more open and confident communication style (Waters, 2005). Likewise, focussing on graduates from Malaysia with qualifications from Australia, Rizvi (2000) found that employers clearly favoured international credentials over and above their domestic alternative. This translated into better employment prospects for returnee, overseas-educated Malaysian graduates. In both these

examples, however, the 'international' refers to very specific qualifications from particular national systems – Canada and Australia. 'International' becomes short-hand for 'English-speaking' (Saarinen & Ennser-Kananen, 2020).

Furthermore, the value attributed to international qualifications can be overstated: these are often sector-dependent (such as public versus private) and can vary by national and geographical context. For example, Brooks et al. (2012) found that in many cases UK students with an 'international' degree qualification felt that their time overseas had actually impeded their ability to secure a desirable job. In part, this was attributed to the ignorance of UK employers who were assumed not to understand the value of a period spent studying abroad nor the meanings of various international qualifications.

In other situations, employers have been seen to prefer domestic qualifications, and this is especially true for jobs in the public sector (where local knowledge is deemed more valuable) (Leung and Waters 2017). For example, in Malaysia, a UK degree holder of Chinese origin (an ethnic minority) would be viewed positively within private sector organisations, and yet the exact same qualifications may be valued much less highly within the public sector – because of both the ethnic composition of the workforce (largely ethnic majority) and the greater priority assigned to local cultural capital (Sin, 2009).

Lee's (2021) work provides an excellent illustration of the limitations to the scope of 'the international' when it comes to mobile students and recent graduates. She has considered, specifically, the desire amongst current and graduated international students in the UK to pursue an 'international career'. Although many individuals seemed, at first, to embrace the idea of working 'internationally', as interviews with research participants progressed it became apparent that 'the international' was markedly *limited* in scope. Lee argues that *where* students study (in this case, the UK) significantly shapes their propensity to move subsequently – some host countries (such as Australia and New Zealand) are seen as 'stepping stones' to a (more preferred) country. In contrast, the UK was largely viewed as both a passport to future international mobility *and* an attractive end destination in itself. Many students talked about working in an 'international career' and yet when pressed revealed that that meant either in the UK or the USA (with little variation around this). As argued above, 'the international' is often used as a proxy for the Anglophone West.

Taken as a whole, the literature points to circumscribed understandings of 'international space' within which graduates move. It is often understood in terms of relations between two specific places (e.g. Vancouver and Hong Kong in Waters' 2008 study). Perhaps a more accurate description of this phenomenon would be *bi-lateral*. 'The international' serves, rather, to erase the hierarchies and power dynamics forged through uneven postcolonial relations wherein English and the West retain their discursive and unquestioned dominance (Sidhu et al., 2020).

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have focused explicitly on the 'international' within ISM, asking what it means and how it has been deployed within the extant academic literature, drawing on a critical reading of recent scholarship in this area that has considered the experiences of students. We focused on three areas in particular: the role of the international in motivating students to undertake ISM; how the international shapes experiences of ISM; and,

finally, how conceptions of the international influence the impacts of ISM (in terms of students' identities, aspirations and labour market outcomes – the dominant themes within the extant literature). In sum, it was argued that particular ideas of 'the international' determine where students choose to study and how those destinations are framed and positioned hierarchically. Similar ideas also underpin students' experiences of ISM, with social class and family background playing an important additional role. The impacts of ISM were also related to conceptions of 'the international': students' post-study identities were seen as 'international' but also 'transnational', ethnic, religious or racially-constructed. Finally, we showed how an 'international' degree is seen as a valuable commodity in many labour markets, but that the literature paints a more nuanced picture, where such qualifications are valued in *particular* employment sectors, attached to *particular* countries and not, as might be assumed, universally valorised. Furthermore, conceptions of an 'international career' are predictably limited and a proxy for Anglophone countries located in the Global North.

Thus, one of the key aims of this paper has been to highlight the *limitations* in how the term 'international' is deployed and mobilised in relation to ISM. International implies 'many countries' and a global scope. In fact, international has often come to indicate a highly circumscribed geographical focus, and this is despite a notable diversity in the foci of discussions around ISM (and diversity in where students are choosing to study) over the past decade (Waters & Brooks, 2021). As Saarinen and Ennser-Kananen (2020) have argued in relation to the 'international' in discussions of higher education, it represents a 'paradox': 'it can lead *both* to an increased diversity of perspectives and a narrowing Westernisation and Anglicisation of higher education at the same time' (p. 117, emphasis added).

This leads us to consider why this might be the case. To some extent, it could be seen to reflect dominant flows of students. However, also important are the perspectives and locations of *the researchers themselves* – located in and coming out of the Global North: 'Research on patterns of ISM and the dynamics shaping these patterns has been dominated by studies reflecting a Western orientation, discourse and understanding' (Kondakci et al., 2018). It is interesting to reflect on the fact that development studies have had little to say about international student mobility, just as researchers interested in ISM rarely engage with concepts and ideas emanating from development studies. Instead, research has demonstrated a continued and ongoing emphasis on the relationship between particular ('sending' and 'receiving') nation-states. This can be seen in three ways, with an emphasis on: students moving between one country and another (e.g. Yang, 2016; Waters, 2005); students from multiple sending countries moving to one receiving country (e.g. Fincher & Shaw, 2009; Robertson, 2013; Tannock, 2018); or one sending and multiple receiving countries (e.g. Fong, 2011). Consequently, the literature tends to construct international space as something closely related to nation-states, and often bi-lateral in nature, rather than viewing it through a more global, multi-national, transnational or cosmopolitan optic (although see, for example, Chankseliani, 2018). There has been an implicit rejection (in recent scholarship) of those who have argued that globalisation has diminished the national as the 'natural' scale of politics and policy (e.g. Ozga & Lingard, 2007). There still exists an implicit methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Interestingly, however, despite this emphasis on nation-states, the number of explicit comparative studies of ISM remain relatively small and we can discern little direct

connection with the sub-discipline of comparative studies. Such issues constitute important challenges for ISM scholars. The limits to the specific ways in which the concept of 'international' is deployed need to be exposed and addressed (through, for example, greater engagement with other (sub-)disciplinary perspectives, and with scholars from outside the Global North). Otherwise, there is a danger that scholarship is not only missing important *alternative* geographies of ISM, but is also inadvertently perpetuating the myth that 'the international' can be equated to Anglophone, Western locations and thereby enacting a form of neo-colonialism.

Notes

1. These are students moving outside their country of birth or citizenship for tertiary education, usually on a student visa of some sort. On occasion, the difference between 'international student' and 'foreign student' is evoked. Organisations such as the OECD use 'international student' to refer to students crossing international borders with the intention of studying (usually with specific student visas), as described above. In contrast, the term 'foreign student' can be applied to any non-citizen studying within a country (these individuals do not necessarily move for educational purposes). In this paper, therefore, the term international student is the most appropriate for our discussion. However, as we highlight below, the term 'foreign' or 'foreigner', to describe international students, is sometimes deployed negatively and with discriminatory undertones (such as in the 'struggling foreigner' discourse). This is very much intentional by those attempting to denigrate international students, and not a reflection of the 'visa status' of the individual students themselves.
2. We can only speculate on the reasons for this. One is likely to be funding bodies (located in the Global North) being more likely to fund research on migration to the Global North. Another might reflect the propensity of scholars to be themselves located in the Global North and therefore more comfortable researching immigration within these locations.

Disclosure statement

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