

BOOK REVIEW

Beech, S. (2019). *The geographies of international student mobility. Spaces, places and decision making.* London: Palgrave Macmillan

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Within a special focus on the geographies of student mobility, in this text, Suzanne Beech explores international students' insights about their own academic decisions in a crucial moment of globalisation and internationalisation of the higher education. The participants in this book are from three UK universities: The Queens University Belfast, University of Aberdeen and University of Nottingham as well as observations of international recruiting fairs in Hong Kong as being one of the places with a good number of future international students. Most of the exploration of this book, through the nine chapters, gives answers to the understanding of decision-making.

In the first chapter, the author gives an introduction of the book in a well-explained summary about the information to be found in the book, which could be a perfect guide to overview future chapters. The general idea of this session is that student's mobility as well known is increasing year by year, as found in an online source:

"International student recruitment numbers have grown exponentially since the turn of the century, quadrupling to reach five million between 1990 and 2014. By 2025, this number is expected to hit 8 million." (Growth of International Student Numbers in Higher Education, n.d).

However, it is a phenomenon that has its historical background, and a positive thing of this book is that it shows in a very understandable way an impression of mobilisation of the students from many years ago. In order to understand what mobility entails, the book depicts research conducted from 2010 to 2017, which considers three target groups, for instance, international students, recruiting staff and international events, also the author uses different methodologies like focus groups, interviews and observations respectively.

In chapter two, the author introduces the idea that international student's mobility is shaped by policy geographies. By this, she means that the policies in the moment of enrolment in studies play a role in students' decision making. As the context in this particular case is the UK, there was a friendly post-study visa before 2012 that allowed graduates to stay in the country for two years, but then this changed. Although the UK is a primary destination to study, some other

countries are being considered for study such as Australia, Germany, Canada, among others. The fact of travelling to a country to study is one manifestation of mobility, but also four categories of trade are listed in this book regarding education (p. 28). The first one being distance learning, the second is education overseas, the third one is campuses or course overseas in other international universities and movement between countries providing exchange programs. Nevertheless, world-class university for opening branch campuses does not mean a high enrolment, as students do not consider studying at an expensive international university located in their home country, being taught by local members, having little sense of being an international student. This would be a way of accessing higher education if they do not have more options.

The author also places the importance of rankings for students and states the USA and the UK as overrepresented in the rankings. A factor that gives recognition to the countries and to some of its universities, which, due to its reputation, attract students without the need to hire agencies as other less prestigious universities do. Considering that an undergraduate degree now is considered as a minimum (p. 32). Students search for a constant opportunity of education, and in an economic system, they can be seen as clients, over the perception of learners. The author reveals that in English policy documents there is an expression used for students which instead of the word learners are considered as consumers and then the institutions, research, teaching and learning are all offered as products (p. 33), so in this term, the students are purchasing a qualification that gives a step for finding employment. Another policy factor in International students setting is the higher charges compared to local students, so they are investing in education with the expectation to get their investment back after finishing their studies and additionally, for the sake of shorter-term studies compared to other places or their home countries. For instance, master degrees take one year instead of two years. Briefly, this chapter depicts how policies shape mobility or even home countries attempt to keep their mobile students after graduation encouraging their students to return home, an obvious way is giving some government scholarship and remain in the country the same or twice of the time their studies took abroad.

In chapter three, the author discusses how policy has influenced the geographies of the relationships between universities and higher education recruiting agencies. Through having online interviews with university staff, the author could visualise the types of relations that need to be developed in order to have a key successful understanding of their “product”, as one of the staff members said because they cannot send lots of applications that would be rejected. Almost all UK institutions use agencies, these have an important role for recruiting students, as they are commonly from the same country of the students and without language barriers, they suggest or recommend institutions and describe how life could be in certain destinations. However, in order to do so, it is a key factor to know them and offer them training, and invite them to experience life with a realistic budget for students. Therefore, they can offer precise real information. On the other hand, if an agent sends a very poor number of students, the contract will be ended. Therefore, the agents are monitored in terms of their productivity and regular visits, to ensure everything is under control as they are using the name of the university and they want it to be well used, making sure agents are keen on recruiting on their behalf, as they work under commissions by the universities. In conclusion, although there are different brokers in student’s recruitment, this chapter takes the agents as its focus because of its value for mobility.



In chapter four, the author introduces the data collected from international students which focuses on their geographies of consumption and how they can be considered consumers of higher education based on international student interviews and focus groups from Aberdeen, Queen's University of Belfast and Nottingham, being the last one with more overseas and international students. There is a variety of different reasons for study abroad, among them career development, travel and to consider a more permanent migration abroad. Some other reasons to consider where to study are the financial and the time it will take to complete their degree programs. In this chapter, there is a characterisation of students' age, degrees and nationalities. In the surveys, it was intended to know about links and networks to study abroad, finding that 89% of the respondents knew an acquaintance, teachers or someone who travelled overseas, some of the people recommend countries or even universities based on their experience, and for students, this is a key source. Some of the reasons to study abroad are the reputation of the university, the courses and as a second layer, their friends and family. Once the decision is made, then the next step to decide has two influencers, the city and family ties. About the city, some choosing universities in small cities for lower cost of living and related to family ties, making the decision is not easy, on the contrary, it is risky financially, academically and personally. In addition, Students looked at rankings and foreseen the job market when graduating (Czimre et al. 2016.) Studying abroad was connected with their perception of deficiencies with the higher education infrastructure in their home countries. However, this does not mean that they will enjoy 100% in the international universities, some of them regret their selection, but all the participants could think of the oversell by agents. Some answers cannot be generalised as for other students who spend years working and away from the school system, chose the UK for being shorter programs. Another reason to choose the UK was because they did not want to have the stress to struggle with a different language outside the university. Another reason to choose for those interviewed before 2012 was the possibility to stay two more years with a work visa without finding sponsor, but after that year other destinations like Australia, New Zealand and Canada have benefited of these changes. To summarise, international students appeared to be rational in their decision-making and have networks that provide perspectives regarding their choices.

In chapter five, the author offers some insights into the students understanding of excellence. The author reveals that the reason to study abroad has something to do with the perceived quality of education that the host country can offer. There are three factors considered when choosing where to study: quality of the education, reputation of the university and the recognition of the degree (Kasza & Hangyal, 2018). Although the rankings are considered, they do not accurately measure the value of a university or the degrees it offers. The UK has pride in the excellent reputation standing internationally, and this fit the students search for prestige which privileges the countries which conform to the Anglo-American publication culture. Consequently, university performance becomes essential at the time of enrolment. It was very interesting for me as a reader that only two participant students used the Research assessment exercise (RAE) to select the top 20 universities. In fact, the selection process depends on students' point of view and their country of origin, such as for some the important part was to have a UK diploma, whereas others were more elitist, considering universities by their name. Another reason to choose one university over the other depended on how they feel at the moment of the interview. Unpopular reasons were the age of the university as well as its history. Nevertheless, the standard answer is the travel opportunities according to the geographical position of the



university. Briefly, it can be said that a primary goal is to obtain a university degree from a good university with quality of education.

In chapter six, the author presents the influence that social networks play in students' mobility. The decision-making to study abroad is complex, but one of the aspects that take great importance is friendships and kinship networks. Study overseas can be costly, not only economically, but also emotionally. Mobility is a social practice that includes networks of friends, family and social networking sites that allow keeping in contact with those at home or with others who are currently overseas. The familiarity with travelling comes from the connections people have formed with others who engaged in mobility in the past, transmitting the idea that mobility represents cultural capital that at the moment of graduation would benefit with language and intercultural communication. In which the acquisition of meaning is not only to the student life but to the construction of biographical projects which differentiate them from the others who stay at home.

Those who decided to step out of their country rely on social networks such as Facebook to contact other international students who already live overseas and can advise on course and institution. Thus, social networks are crucial in two aspects. First, they provide a sense that other students have chosen to make the same move and second their networks reassure their final choice on where to study. These social networks appeared to take the form of embedded cultures of mobility. For some students knowing that others are mobile, influence towards doing the same, some others felt envy of others opportunity. In this experience of becoming mobile students have the opportunity to write their own biographies which are separated by those dictated by culture or family.

In chapter seven, the author considers how imaginative geographies are mobilised by students in their choices. Perceptions of place are important in student's mobility, and unlike some of the participants had previous experience of the geographical location of their places of study, some which build an imaginative based on the agents, and here is where they play their vital role as they create an idealised landscape to attract students. This imaginary idea of place could be called imaginative geography based on the values assigned to a certain place. Some other factors contribute to the perception of a place such as television, magazines, newspapers and films. In their personal perspectives, some of them associate the place with famous films, movies or the architecture of the buildings can captivate students and preconceptions of lifestyle in Scotland for example as well as the unique experience to study in a place with the influence of both Irish and British culture. It was interesting to discover reading the interviews that students have lack of knowledge regarding cultural aspects of the country, but while living there, they discover and learn new things, which reinforces the idea of expanding knowledge outside the academic information. To sum up, recruitment agencies can easily influence the imagination of students and even more when they lack geographical knowledge.

In chapter eight, the author analyses the experiences of the post-arrival students' on campus. Students feel proud of their choice and view travel as a necessary learning experience recommended to everyone. For some, this could be a journey of self-discovery or re-discovery of themselves and their belief values. Research suggests that overseas experiences challenge precious beliefs and new ways of thinking and behaving emerge from successful interaction with other cultures. A positive aspect from the mobility is that it makes students understandable by others and therefore easier to make friendships. Although homophily is present as a means to



find similar friends for a desire for familiarity, international students have the idea of making friendships with locals and other international students. However, building friendships with locals turn to be infrequent maybe due to the unwillingness of locals to be open, or passive or subconscious xenophobia. The experience of studying with people from different nationalities is not possible to be experienced at home, gaining unique skills and self-development as they would be exposed to different opinions or thoughts. There was something that called my attention in this chapter, and it was that being an international student makes them become part of a distinct cultural group. Supporting each other and sharing their experiences. In a mobile setting, students want to open themselves to multicultural friendships, but even in a multiracial classroom, they tend to cluster within the same ethnic groups, possibly due to less work than to socialise with others. On the contrary, they want to find communities outside the university, a fact that is important when connecting with people of similar background due to religion, ethnicity or nationality (King & Baxter, 2005). However, one of the participant's answers to the question "what is the purpose of international education?" for him it is to experience something different as this overseas is not supposed to be a second home (215). All in all, after the student's arrival, there are different experiences to be documented based on what they expected and what they face in their daily life. Though some want to avoid home practices, others perform them in order to avoid feelings of loneliness or homesickness.

In the last chapter, the author summarises the findings and proposes further research. The evidence on the economic numbers reports the benefits of recruiting overseas students. However, there are three central themes: the nonlinearization and marketisation of the higher education system which drives student's recruitment, the view of students as consumers and the belief of students that they are pioneers. The first one, recruiting higher education encouraged competition and open opportunities to universities to seek new forms of income and capital because international students play an important role in supporting the cost of research and teaching due to the inflated fees they pay. International students' mobility is part of an established global migration industry which facilitates the movement of highly skilled migrants. Sadly, Universities are keen to attract internationals for the economic benefits they can obtain, more than for the value they can add to the student experience. The second one, referring to China as a big sender of students, this could lead to a devaluation of an international degree as most of the people would have one, and then to study in prestigious institutions would be the next competitive level. Moreover, the last aspect is the consideration of international students as pioneers, for the higher education is an experiential pursuit, the confirmation of their social networks gives them confidence, and even though they know of others who have done it previously. They consider themselves to be pioneers in the search for opportunities.

This is an engaging book, which involves contemporary concerns. Different perspectives from mobility are described there. In my opinion, the author style is understandable for a reader that does not need to resort other sources to understand the discussions. Many of the elements are supported and well exemplified by the data collected from the participants. The book, in my opinion, achieves its purpose on depicting the different pictures that are identified in student decision-making and how policy in macro and micro scales has a role. The contribution of it is invaluable to the field of international student mobility as the author seeks to contribute to the development of a theoretical framework in this thematic as well as it



initiates ideas of further research into the long-term impact of international student's well-being among others.

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