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EDITORIAL

International Student Mobility: Precarity, Pandemics and Resilience

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1 | Introduction

The number of international students has surged significantly worldwide, primarily originating from countries in the Global South. These regions benefit from substantial demographic dividend and an expanding middle class eager to invest in international education to enhance returns on human capital. In 2018, 6.1 million students worldwide were enrolled in a degree programme outside of their home country (OECD 2021). Glass and Cruz (2023) indicate a threefold increase in student migration compared to the early 2000s. The traditional mobility corridors from East to West, are gradually changing, as more regional hubs emerge to promote South-South mobility (Kondakci et al. 2018). International Student Mobility (ISM) needs to be situated within the larger global flow of capital, goods and services. The process of globalization, cultural exchange and shifting geopolitical relations significantly influences who migrates, the duration of their stay, and the development of new 'arrival infrastructures' (Meeus et al. 2019; Roohi 2022) for students and skilled migrants (Bailey and Mulder 2017). At the core of ISM are the students themselves, whose aspirations, motivations, and sense of adventure drive their accumulation, borrowing, and investment of resources to achieve their dreams and those of their families (see Chacko 2021; Gilmartin et al. 2021; Thomas 2017). Kölbel (2020) working among Nepali students, observes how imagined geographies of migration and education, contribute to the motivations and aspirations of both students in their home countries and destination countries. This dynamic interplay between imagined geographies and education underscores the complex motivations underpinning ISM and its implications on a global scale (King and Raghuram 2013).

On 11 March, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially classified the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) as a pandemic, acknowledging the rapid and widespread increase in infections worldwide. This global health crisis has been one of the most significant viral epidemics in modern history, resulting in unprecedented measures that deeply impacted societies on multiple levels. Among the various responses to contain the virus and mitigate its impact, one of the most profound has been the implementation of extensive lockdowns across the world, which had a particularly severe effect on the education sector.

Educational institutions globally were compelled to implement a range of emergency measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (Babbar and Gupta. 2022). These interventions encompassed the enforcement of travel restrictions, both for incoming and outgoing individuals, the abrupt transition to online instructional modalities, and the imposition of quarantine periods for exposed or infected persons. While these actions were necessary for public health, they exerted immense pressure on students, educators, and educational institutions (Watermeyer et al. 2021; Lee et al. 2022). The challenges encountered in addressing the needs of the entire student population during the pandemic were largely attributable to the lack of preparedness for the sudden implementation of novel teaching approaches, as well as the shift to virtual communication and information dissemination (Lyrio et al. 2023). The challenge was to maintain the quality of education and achieve learning objectives despite the constraints imposed by the pandemic. The transition to online education, although a viable solution to prevent the complete disruption of learning, introduced significant hurdles. The abrupt nature of this transition meant that many institutions and individuals were unprepared for the technological and pedagogical shifts required. Teachers had to rapidly adapt to new methods of instruction, often with limited resources and training (Motala and Menon 2020; Charania et al. 2021). Students, on the other hand, faced issues

of accessibility, digital literacy, and the lack of a conducive learning environment at home. Furthermore, the reliance on digital platforms highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities, particularly affecting students from the Global South who had limited access to reliable internet and technological devices.

The politicization of vaccination efforts further revealed deep fissures within the international education ecosystem (Cohen et al. 2021). Disparities in vaccine distribution and availability created additional barriers for students, especially those from less affluent countries (Bergen et al. 2023). The delay in vaccination rollouts in these regions meant prolonged disruptions to in-person learning and continued reliance on less effective virtual modes of education(Miguel and Mobarak 2022). This situation significantly increased the precarity faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds, heightening concerns about equity and access in education on a global scale. The overall impact of the pandemic on education has been profound. It is estimated that students worldwide lost approximately a year of meaningful education due to school closures and the shift to online learning (Azevedo et al. 2021). This loss encompasses not only the academic subject matter but also the vital social and developmental components of education that are essential for comprehensive personal growth. The challenge of adjusting to novel learning settings, combined with the isolation and ambiguities stemming from the pandemic, has adversely impacted the mental health and well-being of both students and educators. (Kee 2021; Burns et al. 2020).

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fragilities and disparities inherent within the global education system. The emergency interventions implemented to mitigate the spread of the virus, although necessary, have presented substantial obstacles that have transformed the educational milieu. The long-term ramifications of this disruption remain to be fully elucidated, but it is evident that the pandemic has emphasized the imperative for more robust and equitable educational frameworks capable of weathering such worldwide crises in the days to come. The pandemic has highlighted the need for education systems to be more adaptable, resilient, and inclusive, ensuring that all learners, regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographical location, have access to quality educational opportunities even in times of crisis. As we move forward, it is crucial that policymakers, educators, and stakeholders work collaboratively to develop innovative solutions and strategies that address the systemic challenges exposed by the pandemic, ultimately creating a more resilient and equitable global education system.

2 | International Student Mobility: Precarity, Pandemic and Resilience

This special issue delves into the intricate dynamics of International Student Mobility amid the COVID-19 pandemic, scrutinizing the resulting precarity and the capacities for resilience among this demographic. The pandemic-induced lockdowns, fluctuating entry requirements, and the complex politics surrounding access to preventive measures have significantly impacted human mobility in all its forms. Notably, both national and international student mobilities were abruptly and unceremoniously halted, stripping away the self-actualization and adventure that typically underpin these experiences leaving students confined to virtual classrooms (Koris et al. 2021; Watermeyer et al. 2021).

This special issue explores: 1) the precarity that resulted for international students and their parents in country of origin as parents in the Global South primarily fund international education. Student precarity or precariousness here is understood broadly to include such as economic, social, cultural and psychological components (Chacko 2021; Green et al. 2020; Schierup and Jørgensen 2016). These components are not mutually exclusive but intersect to often have an adverse impact on students and their families back home. 2) The resilience capacities of students, diasporas and linked organizations that organized safety nets to adapt to the lockdowns and COVID induced vulnerabilities. The pandemic also highlighted the integral role played by non-state actors, communities, charities and diasporic organisations (see Kelly and Niraula 2023) to create safety nets. Resilience in this context, refers to the ability/inability to adapt and cope when faced with a crisis (in this case the pandemic). Importantly, this examination does not seek to shift the burden of coping onto the students but rather aims to explore the available opportunities and mechanisms that support students and their peer groups in navigating these unprecedented challenges. Thus, the issue provides a comprehensive exploration of how international student mobility was reshaped by the pandemic, highlighting both the vulnerabilities exposed and the resilience mechanisms that were activated in response.

The diverse nature of the papers we present in this special issue critically examines a wide spectrum of factors, institutions and actions taken to support/discriminate students during and after the pandemic. The opportunity for international students to transition from education to employment in the Global North and to potentially become citizens are key drivers for mobility (Waters and Brooks 2021). Since migration is the result of both individual motivations and family strategies, work, assets and migrants' social networks need to be considered to situate ISM in the larger context of household and kinship relations (King and Sondhi 2018). We look at the broader ecosystem of ISM and situate the contentious relationships between student migrants and intermediaries or consultants or agents is also very relevant (Baas 2019; Beech 2018; Walton-Roberts 2021). These mediators significantly shape migration experiences and outcomes by steering students towards specific locations, occupations, and industries, thereby influencing migration patterns and moulding post-arrival living and working circumstances. The involvement of these intermediaries not only affects the students' initial migration decisions but also their long-term integration and success in the host countries, making the study of their role crucial in understanding the full spectrum of international student migration (Rajan et al. 2024). Thus, the collection of studies in this issue offers a comprehensive analysis of the complex interplay between various factors that shape the migration journeys and experiences of international students, providing valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of ISM.

This special issue delves into the profound transformation in pedagogical approaches necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the missed travel opportunities and the consequential effects of lockdowns on students' health and well-being, alongside shifts in cultural perceptions of higher

education within developed nations. As we approach the final decade to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, with migration being a central theme, it becomes crucial to foster collaboration among stakeholders, form robust networks, and build capacity, while gaining a deeper understanding of international student mobility. The policy-related significance of this special issue is particularly pertinent to mainstream development discourses, which argue that remittances from student migrants who become skilled professionals serve as a potent tool for development finance (McKenzie and Rapoport 2011; Arenas 2021). The influence of these student migrants is poised to undergo structural changes, even as the incentives for migration potentially intensify due to the interplay of reduced opportunities and various pandemic-related economic, geographic, demographic, and other factors. Given the shifting global demographic, political, and economic landscapes, there is a pressing need for a critical reassessment of skilled migration procedures, motivations, and outcomes (Bailey and Mulder 2017). This issue underscores the imperative to reevaluate the dynamics of student migration within the broader context of global development, thus contributing to the discourse on how best to harness the potential of skilled migrants in fostering sustainable development.

3 | Papers in This Volume

Given the timely nature of this topic, we envisage three important contributions of this special issue. First, is the interdisciplinarity inherent in studying student migration, which goes beyond migration and ethnic studies to also include aspects and dynamics regarding demography, economics, law, social anthropology, and political science. The papers and the expertise of the contributors positions the special issue to cover a broad range of disciplines. The subject of student mobility becomes complicated because of the complexity regarding the migrants' decision to leave, stay or return. In addition to this, multiple dimensions of ethnicity also affect the decision to move, the process of adjustment, and the availability of/access to diasporic networks in destination communities. Second is the importance of the geographic scope of the papers, they not only capture information based on the migration corridors of countries of origin majorly from the global south but also obtain information relevant to several countries of destination. This increases the scope of this special issue to document the transnational cultural change and community formation in the origin and destination countries. Third, and most important, is the attempt to not just fill gaps related to student mobility as a part of the migration continuum, but to support the analysis with unique empirical evidence which is either sparse or difficult to measure. We explore the innovation and creativity of new methods employed by researchers to study the impact of COVID-19 and have the additional benefit of documenting the range of actions taken to support and protect students during and after the pandemic. The papers also make key policy recommendations for governing and implementing ISM during pandemics.

In the discourse surrounding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international student mobility (ISM) decision-making, **Gomes (**this issue) posits that there exists a notable absence of consideration for wellbeing within the ISM scholarship. Gomes's analysis highlights the significant influence of the pandemic on individual ISM decision-making processes, particularly emphasizing the absence of a comprehensive conceptualization and approach to well-being within this scholarly domain. Drawing on data from Australia, Gomes suggests a fundamental shift in student expectations and aspirations precipitated by the pandemic, wherein Australian universities have enhanced their reputation and global competitiveness as destinations for international students by prioritizing their wellbeing. In the context of the United Kingdom, an adverse case, as exemplified by **Sondhi** (this issue) deployed a mixed-methods digital research approach (online surveys and interviews), to examine the pandemic as a crisis which exposed the already failing infrastructures that are supposed to sustain our everyday lives. Through the lens of international students, the paper elucidates the inherently fragile nature of connections and disconnections inherent in these infrastructures, which the pandemic laid bare. The failures of these infrastructures precipitated disabled, delayed and disrupted mobility among international students, consequently impacting the intricate web of connections linking people, places, finances, and knowledge across borders. Concurrently, **Waters** (this issue) draws upon in-depth interviews with UK-based international postgraduate students to discuss how concepts of safety and bodily health are constructed geographically and transnationally, in conversation with family members 'back home' and, conversely, in their embedded and emplaced experiences as international students. More specifically, we have sought to illustrate how these issues are constructed both transnationally, in conversation with significant others, and locally. It was clear that digital technologies were crucial to the sharing of intimate health concerns and we found little evidence that students withheld information, whether to reduce the possibility of causing family 'back home' significant anxiety, or in a quest for some sort of 'privacy.'

Drawing on a range of interviews with Chinese students in the Netherlands, **Leung and colleagues** (this issue) discuss a dynamic and dialectic perspective on arrival infrastructures, demonstrating how such structures are not static networks that determine newcomers' experiences. Rather, migrants exercise their agencies in adapting and actively shaping those infrastructures through processes of homemaking. **França and colleagues** (this issue) investigate the mobility plans of Chinese students to move to Portugal, as well as their experiences abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic. They apply Kilkey and Ryan's (2012) notion of 'unsettling events' to look at how individual migration projects are impacted or re-evaluated when transformations at the structural level happen. Additionally, they also engaged with the'shock mobility' concept proposed by Xiang et al. (2023, p. 1634) to refer to the radical configuration of mobility plans and experiences due to acute disruptions as well as 'state's reactions to disruption.' The narratives presented in these studies suggest that despite these upheavals originating from the experience of international mobility during a significant unsettling event, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese students still valued their mobilities, as they perceived facing these adversities as a key element of the international student experience and a step towards adulthood and becoming more autonomous and independent. This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the

interplay between individual agency, structural forces, and external shocks in shaping migration experiences and outcomes, highlighting the importance of adaptability and resilience in navigating complex migratory landscapes.

Across Europe the lockdowns had an adverse impact. However, A country such as Sweden kept its institutions open, students here had other more pressing concerns. **Ginnerskov–Dahlberg** (this issue) brings out the experience of students from post-Soviet countries pursuing education in Sweden during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their narratives reveal that, for these students, societal challenges in their home countries such as unemployment, fear of state oppression, and even ongoing conflicts, appeared to possess a more enduring and formidable nature, overshadowing the immediate threat posed by COVID-19 to their well-being and sense of ontological security. This observation underscores the necessity for a nuanced discourse on the multifaceted impact of the pandemic.

In the Canadian context, the exploration conducted by **Judge and Walton–Roberts** (this issue) delves into the multifaceted ways in which Indian students have navigated the challenges posed by pandemic-related lockdowns and travel restrictions, encompassing the management of financial concerns alongside adapting to online studies. This investigation is situated within Canada's higher education sector, which has increasingly relied on the substantial financial contributions made by international students, particularly those from India who pay high tuition fees. The influx of international students not only sustains the financial viability of universities but also significantly bolsters local economies, thereby playing a crucial role in regional development. The surge in international student enrolments underscores the sector's growing dependence on them as a primary revenue source, a trend accentuated by the backdrop of diminishing public funding for higher education institutions in Canada. Throughout the pandemic, the imperative to secure this economic lifeline propelled efforts to ensure the uninterrupted admission of international students, presenting a stark contrast to the stringent border control measures that engendered considerable uncertainty and confusion for other categories of immigrants. Complementing this inquiry, **Cherian and Rajan** (this issue) shed light on the aspirations of Indian students to embody ideal neoliberal characteristics, as they strive for prestigious employment opportunities while negotiating cultural expectations within middle-class households (see also Rajan 2024; Rajan et al. 2024). Furthermore, the paper illuminates the evolving landscape of migration facilitation and the pivotal role of migrants' agency in shaping novel migration routes. Against this backdrop, the research delves into the intersections of social media influence, processes of class formation, and student migration, with a particular focus on middle-class young men from Kerala migrating to Canada for educational pursuits.

4 | Way Forward With ISM

This special issue sheds light on the imperative of deepening our understanding of international student mobility (ISM) by scrutinizing its multifaceted dimensions theoretically, empirically, and methodologically. This comprehensive investigation accentuates the pivotal roles various factors play in shaping ISM within the broader context of global capital, goods, and services flows. Situated within this expansive framework, ISM research transcends disciplinary boundaries, offering a critical lens for apprehending the intricate dynamics of migration trajectories and their global ramifications. By conceptualizing ISM not merely as a discrete research domain but as a conduit for comprehending contemporary global mobility patterns, this special issue underscores the significance of situating ISM within broader scholarly discourses encompassing migration studies, international education, and globalization. Through nuanced theoretical frameworks, robust empirical analyses, and innovative methodological approaches, the contributions within this special issue collectively deepen our understanding of ISM as a pivotal component of the contemporary global landscape, illuminating its manifold implications for individuals, institutions, and societies.

Looking ahead, this special issue emphasizes the necessity for a multifaceted approach to address the complexities arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on student mobility. An imperative aspect involves delving deeper into the nuanced experiences of international students, particularly those from the Global South, who have encountered heightened precarity during the pandemic. This exploration should encompass not only economic challenges but also the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of precarity, as underscored by recent scholarship (Chacko 2021; Mulvey et al. 2024; Rajan and Cherian2024). Furthermore, there is an urgent need to investigate the intersectionality of precarity and resilience among international students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds or underrepresented regions. This necessitates examining how socioeconomic disparities, access to healthcare, and institutional support systems influence the well-being and academic success of international students during crises. Understanding these multifaceted challenges is crucial for informing targeted interventions and support mechanisms both during crises and in post-pandemic recovery efforts (Hari et al. 2023).

Moreover, research should probe the evolving role of technology in facilitating virtual mobility experiences and its impact on student integration, academic achievement, and socio-cultural adaptation. By adopting a forward-looking perspective that integrates empirical research with policy analysis, the academic community can contribute to the development of inclusive, equitable, and sustainable strategies for managing the complexities of international student mobility in a rapidly changing global landscape. Additionally, an examination of how policy responses, such as travel restrictions and online learning, have reshaped the decision-making processes of prospective international students is essential, as well as an exploration of the strategies employed by educational institutions and destination countries to attract and retain talent in a more digitally interconnected world. Through such comprehensive inquiries, the academic community can play a vital role in shaping the discourse surrounding ISM and its implications for global higher education.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

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