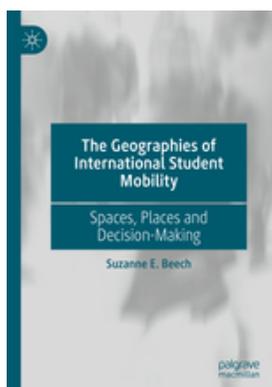


© *Journal of International Students*
Volume 10, Issue 2 (2020), pp. 546-548
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
Doi: 10.32674/jis.v10i2.2187
ojed.org/jis

The Geographies of International Student Mobility: Spaces, Places and Decision-Making

S. Beech, 2019. Palgrave Macmillan: ISBN 9789811374425

Reviewed by Jing Yu, *University of California - Santa Barbara, USA*



The *Geographies of International Student Mobility: Spaces, Places and Decision-Making* is a timely volume offering distinctive and critical insights into the geographical dimensions of international student mobilities. After the 2016 United Kingdom referendum to leave the European Union, and in the same year, the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States, both countries faced the rise of conservative populism and sociopolitical upheavals. Brexit and Trumpism have been reshaping the politics of Western democracies in a more nationalistic and nativist way. This anti-immigration macro-level trend actually has ramifications for the internationalization processes of UK

higher education. The author, Suzanne Beech, provides the readers with a holistic understanding of the motivations and factors that have resulted in today's transnational mobility. The book is organized into four parts in an attempt to bring complex processes and dynamics of students' decision-making to the fore: visa policy, university reputation, social networking, and global imaginary. These different geographies of student mobility are illustrated by abundant data from a quantitative survey, qualitative interviews, as well as consistent participant observation.

To begin with, international student mobility is not a recent phenomenon. This cross-border educational activity is largely influenced, shaped, and decided by national policy geographies, which are often neglected in the existing academic literature. Driven by the neoliberal agenda, UK higher education is already an export

product to be “sold” to the international buyers all over the world. In other words, international students are considered as “consumers, a revenue stream and even a product of the university when they graduate” (Beech, 2019, p. 33). Beech then points out an essential role in this transnational business industry: agents or middlemen, who have commission-based partnerships with UK universities. Agents are more like salespersons hired by these neoliberalized universities to promote their “brand name” and recruit potential customers. Considering economic rationale in neoliberal internationalization, international consumer-led behaviors are devalued in many ways. In addition, overreliance on the revenue that international customers generate will leave universities vulnerable to changes in visa policy and cause unintended consequences. For example, it can be predicted that there will be a drop in numbers within the European Union (EU) student community after the UK’s exit from the EU. Therefore, international student mobility is highly contingent upon governmental policy geographies.

Secondly, for degree-seeking international students, quality education and university reputation seem to be determinants of students’ mobility, both in terms of making the choice to study abroad and choosing where to be enrolled. Reputational value is not only about ranking systems and league tables, but also age and established histories that are favored by students as a key influencer in their decisions to study overseas. Beech explicitly problematizes the global rankings dominated by Anglophone universities, which further widens geographical and sociocultural divides between Global North (e.g. UK, US) and Global South (e.g., China, India).

Furthermore, social networks including kinship and friendship profoundly affect international student mobility. Beech discovers that these reliable resources operate in two ways, explicitly and implicitly. On one hand, relatives or friends will share their overseas experiences and give advice on choosing spaces and places; on the other hand, within this circle, study abroad gradually becomes an expectation and even a norm of the “right” way to follow. It seems that student mobility is an individualized experience in nature, but after analyzing students’ narratives, Beech argues that the decision is more tacitly decided by collective and societal ideology of “ideal” education in Western countries.

Apart from policy, reputation, and networks, the role of imaginative geographies is the last factor that facilitates student mobility. Given that the uneven power relations within the global context have led to the production of a Western-dominated higher education landscape, international student mobility is highly asymmetrical and unidirectional (Marginson, 2006). Specifically, the flow of students paralleled by flows of knowledge has been directed largely from Global South to North—from developing countries (non-White) to Western universities (White), mostly in English-speaking countries. Western education is always constructed as valuable and desirable, while “Asian nations—often colonized—were instead considered to be defeated and distant, irrational and dangerous” (Beech, 2019, p. 173). The phenomenon of such romanticized geography again perpetuates global hierarchies and becomes conflated with reality.

To conclude, Beech in the last chapter summarizes three central themes of a theoretical framework of international student mobility: (a) the UK higher education system is immensely neoliberalized and marketized; (b) Students think and behave as

consumers; and (c) students believe overseas experiences will bring them higher levels of cultural capital and economic prospects on graduation.

I find this volume to be an excellence resource for early-career faculty and researchers, especially when the author reveals how power relations work in creating imaginative geographies on the global level and how students self-perpetuate the idea of “superior” Western education to reinforce global inequalities. This book also provides administrative staff and practitioners a close look into the multifaceted nature of student decision-making to help them better support the unique student population in the UK’s post-Brexit era.

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JING YU, MA, is a teaching assistant in Asian American Studies at the University of California - Santa Barbara, where she is also pursuing a PhD in the Department of Education. Her major research interests focus on international student mobility, recruitment, and lived experiences in the context of American higher education. Email: jing02@ucsb.edu
