

Student-migrants in the UK and Japan: Life course accounts of trajectories through dynamic and divergent pathways in the education-migration nexus

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Summary

International flows of students and workers are established features of higher education systems and the global economy, but the relatively distinct roles that these populations have played historically have recently become more closely entwined. International students continue to be integral to the modern higher education landscape, but are also increasingly considered to be a source of skilled workers (Ziguras & Law, 2006). Accordingly, we have witnessed an increase in critical concern around student-migrants and the so-called “education-migration nexus” (Robertson, 2013). However, existing understandings of this nexus are insufficient, with particular difficulties in modelling the emergence and decline of migration pathways. Besides a few notable exceptions (Ryan, 2018; Sato, 2018), the Japanese case is particularly neglected.

A new research agenda has emerged utilizing methodological and theoretical concepts from both higher education and migration studies. This study seeks to contribute to this research agenda, using biographical interviews and a life course perspective to further our understanding of potential-student migrants’ trajectories through two migration pathways in the process of transition: the increasingly inhospitable UK, and the slowly liberalizing Japan. In doing so, the study hopes to expand upon Levantino et al.’s (2018) study of “convergent and divergent dynamics” among student-migration pathways in Europe, furthering our understanding of the global student-migration landscape by encompassing a potentially crucial player.

The UK has been a key player in global international student mobility, recognized among the short list of “receiving” countries that attract and host large numbers of international students. For a short time, the UK also made explicit policy moves to open dedicated pathways for international students to transition to migrant status. In line with similar developments in Canada and Australia, the UK witnessed a boom in both inbound student mobility and students transitioning to the labor force. However, recent reforms have sought to narrow these student migration pathways, coinciding with a leveling-off of inbound student mobility and a sharp decline in those who remain after graduation. Japan has taken the opposite trajectory. After incremental progress for a number of decades, MEXT’s longstanding ambitions to increase inbound student mobility have witnessed a sharp uptake in recent years, supported by a further wave of internationalizing reforms in their higher education system (Yonezawa & Yonezawa, 2016). Subtle indications in governmental strategy documents also indicate that the door has begun to open for student-migrants as part of a broader attitude of

guarded liberalization of immigration policy. The “designated activities” job hunting visa for international students formalized a migration pathway for international students in Japan, and support systems for students pursuing such a transition are rapidly developing (JASSO, 2018).

This study takes advantage of this divergence in policy approaches and seeks explicitly to engage with the “human face” of the education-migration nexus in two dynamic systems (Favell, Feldblum, & Smith, 2007). Biographical interviews with international students approaching their graduation and in the active process of considering and negotiating their migrant transitions offer sorely needed individual-level empirical evidence of trajectories through two divergent migration pathways. These narrative accounts offer original insights into the dynamic agency of potential student-migrants. A further contribution of such narratives is the biographically informed and temporally sensitive picture they form of the emergence and decline of migration intentions. Such evidence invaluable in developing our understanding of migration trajectories in the case of the UK and Japan, with broader implications for improving our understanding of the emergence and decline of student-migration pathways across the world, and supporting the development of more nuanced models of student-migration in future.

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