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The role of place in international student mobility

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ABSTRACT

Place is an important factor influencing international student mobility (ISM). However, few studies have comprehensively examined the role of place in ISM. This special issue intends to narrow this gap by considering the role of place in ISM from different perspectives. The articles contributing to the special issue discuss three dimensions of place, namely the physical characteristics of place, the meanings and valuations of place, and social inequalities associated with place. The special issue highlights several theoretical, methodological, and empirical avenues to further advance research on the role of place in ISM.

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Introduction

Place is a crucial concept in research on international student mobility (ISM). Many scholars have examined physical mobility to and from particular places, such as specific (world) regions, countries, cities, and higher education institutions (e.g. Abbott and Silles 2016; Baláž, Williams, and Chrančoková 2018; Börjesson 2017; Caruso and de Wit 2015; Hou and Du 2022; Kondakci, Bedenlier, and Zawacki-Richter 2018; Kritz 2015; Rodríguez González, Bustillo Mesanza, and Mariel 2011; Van Mol and Ekamper 2016; Waters and Brooks 2022; Weber, Van Mol, and Wolbers 2024).

Yet, there have been few attempts to comprehensively conceptualise place in the literature on ISM. Rather, place often remains the unspoken ground on which the literature on ISM is crafted. Our special issue aims to narrow this gap in the academic literature. We argue that to fully understand ISM processes, it is not only necessary to examine *why* students move, but also *where* they move from and to. The 'where' has often been the setting to the questions of 'why'. This special issue specifically asks what difference it makes when the 'where' occupies centre stage. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of literature focussing on how destination choices are affected by wider geographical, social, economic, institutional, and ideological contexts at the places of origin and destination (e.g. Beine, Noël, and Ragot 2014; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Perkins and Neumayer 2014; Prazeres et al. 2017; Restaino, Vitale, and Primerano 2020; Rodríguez González, Bustillo Mesanza, and Mariel 2011; Tindal et al. 2015; Vögtle and Windzio 2016, 2023).

In the following, we discuss three dimensions of place addressed by the contributions to this special issue. Referring to these dimensions, we then describe the design and summarise the key findings of these contributions. We conclude by highlighting directions for future research on the role of place in ISM.

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Dimensions of place in relation to international student mobility

The articles in this special issue address three salient and interrelated dimensions of place: (a) the *physical characteristics* of place, (b) the *meanings* and *valuations* of place, and (c) *social inequalities* associated with place.

Physical characteristics of place

To begin with, the dynamics of ISM are influenced by how the places between which international students move are structured from a physical point of view. Physical origin and destination sites can influence students' experiences and their current and future mobility decisions. The ISM literature often refers to specific countries (e.g. Abbott and Silles 2016; Börjesson 2017; Caruso and de Wit 2015; Kondakci, Bedenlier, and Zawacki-Richter 2018; Perkins and Neumayer 2014; Rodríguez González, Bustillo Mesanza, and Mariel 2011; Vögtle and Windzio 2016, 2023) and, less frequently, cities of origin and destination (e.g. Malet Calvo 2018; Van Mol and Ekamper 2016). However, it can also refer to specific living areas, buildings, or rooms in which students are situated or where they assemble. It is therefore important to reflect on the physical characteristics of places, such as geographical location, size, infrastructure, available amenities, and connections to other places. Similarly, the scales at which students move matter, such as their home, neighbourhood, city, region, country, or world region. Such physical characteristics are important to understand how geographical sites impact the spatial dynamics of ISM.

Places can also be seen as being physically produced. Material structures are not static but transform over time depending on demographic, social, political, and environmental changes, which may also change patterns of ISM as time passes. Vice versa, this theme of dynamicity is illustrated by scholars who show that international students can also transform the physical characteristics of their destinations. For example, ISM can lead to urban transformations contributing to the economies of destination cities and countries (e.g. Malet Calvo 2018). This includes the building of new complexes for educational activities, the development of housing complexes for students, and the change of land use in urban centres from office space to accommodate the needs of students for commerce, entertainment, and housing (e.g. Collins 2010; Riaño and Piguet 2016). Students' potential activities of entrepreneurship during and after their studies, the tourism activities that visiting family members generate, and the urban developments they foster all contribute to making and remaking the physical features of places.

Meanings and valuations of place

Individuals also attribute meanings and values to the places they inhabit. According to Riaño (2017: 41), meaning 'refers to the significance that human beings attribute to the material spaces in which/through which they carry out their human actions'. She argues further that 'material sites are not merely a container where human action takes place. Rather, material sites are symbolically transformed into a *meaningful composite* through physical manipulation, social interaction, appropriation, experience, representation, and remembering' (idem: 44). This implies that the meanings and valuations of places are not static but tend to vary across individuals and over time (see also Prazeres et al. 2017).

The geographer Derek Gregory (1994) used the term 'geographical imagination' to refer to the diversity of perspectives, positions, and subjectivities embodied in human understandings of place. This geographical imagination of possible destinations affects ISM. For instance, individuals' imaginations of 'other' places and the opportunities that they associate with those places play an important role in their decisions about whether and where to migrate (Riaño 2015).

Consequently, an analysis of place in the context of ISM also calls for an engagement with how students construct places in their narratives, give meaning and value to them, and how, thereby, specific places shape their mobility decisions.

Social inequalities associated with place

Places are marked by social inequalities, and these inequalities can influence ISM. For instance, existing global power inequalities – both between and within countries or regions – influence educational opportunities across places. Moreover, as some regions offer greater opportunities to propel students' spatial mobility, they may also offer greater opportunities for social mobility (for a broader theoretical debate on escalator regions in the migration literature, see, e.g. Fielding 1992; van Ham et al. 2012).

Because of such differences in opportunity structures, destination places stand in a hierarchical order in terms of desirability and distinctiveness (Brooks and Waters 2022; Raghuram 2013; Waters 2012). This hierarchical order plays an important role in how international students narrate and reconfigure markers of distinction to validate their destination choices (Prazeres et al. 2017).

Moreover, previous research has amply demonstrated that participation in ISM is strongly influenced by social markers of difference, such as gender (e.g. Cordua and Netz 2022; Di Pietro 2022, 2023; Hurst 2019; Sondhi and King 2017; Van Mol 2022), socio-economic status (e.g. Di Pietro 2020; Hauschildt, Vögtle, and Gwosć 2018; Lörz, Netz, and Quast 2016; Netz and Finger 2016; Waters and Brooks 2010), and ethnicity (e.g. Netz et al. 2020), as well as intersections of these markers (e.g. Aerts and Van Mol 2023; Cordua and Netz 2022). Importantly, the influence of these markers may vary across places; this is because the meanings of gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity, and hence their effects, are likely highly place-dependent.

The nationality of students can also be either an advantage or a disadvantage for their mobility and experiences, as location-specific regimes regulate ISM (e.g. Gilmartin, Coppari, and Phelan 2021; Martin 2017; Maury 2017). For instance, international students who are nationals of an EU member state will have more freedom of movement and settlement within the EU compared to third-country nationals. Such place-specific regulations create a stratification of rights between students according to their nationality – and may thus lead to social inequalities between and within countries (Riaño, Lombard, and Piguet 2018).

Lastly, students themselves can also become vectors of change by influencing social (in)equalities in both origin and destination areas. In both areas, they may accelerate or reduce economic and social development – thus either exacerbating or mitigating existing inequality dynamics.

Contributions to the special issue

The articles in this special issue contribute to broadening our understanding of the three identified dimensions of place and their interrelationships.

The issue begins with a theoretical discussion by Raghuram, Breines, and Gunter (2023), who explore places as *locations*, which they understand as locales produced in and through networks emerging through personal, institutional, national, historical, and contemporary interactions. The authors draw on research with Zimbabwean, Nigerian, and Namibian international distance education students who study at the University of South Africa (UNISA). UNISA's main offices are located in Pretoria (South Africa), and they merely act as places of collection, coordination, communication, and credentialling. Students rarely go to the UNISA campuses. Instead, they rely on virtual infrastructures, such as online courses, social media-based teaching groups, and the ability to undertake a lot of the administrative work online. This allows them to stay in their places of residence and yet study abroad (cf. Breines, Raghuram, and Gunter 2019). Furthermore, drawing on Massey's (1994) theoretical proposition – that places are relationally produced – Raghuram, Breines, and Gunter (2023: 3) expand our understanding of place by showing how 'places are produced through a multiplicity of relations – economic, political, social and cultural, both contemporarily and over time'. They are always connected to other places, and it is the unique qualities of these connections that distinguish places. Furthermore, disconnections may also shape places. This is the case when flows of knowledge and institutional investments for international

students are stopped or redirected. The authors also explore so-called ‘non-places’ regarding internationalisation, which they conceptualise as sites which have *no major meaning* because they are only passages of transit. By directing attention to disconnections and non-places, their article offers a new perspective for future research on the role of place in ISM.

Ginnerskov-Dahlberg (2021) understands places as *geographical locations* imbued with *meaning* and *value*. She also draws attention to the *social inequalities* that exist between different locations. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with 22 Eastern European students (from Bosnia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, and Serbia) enrolled in master’s programmes in Denmark, she sheds light on these students’ dominant geographical imaginaries, which have informed their decision to pursue education abroad. Difficulties in aligning their life with a desired life trajectory in their home countries made these students long for a new beginning in a foreign land. Ginnerskov-Dahlberg shows that students imagine Scandinavia as a place of abundant opportunities. These imaginaries reflect an overarching narrative of ‘the West’ as a place that offers a mode of existence allegedly superior to that in Eastern Europe. However, geographical imaginaries also work the other way around: by representing Eastern European students through negative stereotypes, mainstream national media in Denmark project the idea that these students represent a potential burden on the Danish government’s finances. By emphasizing that the students’ imaginaries of Denmark cannot be separated from their imaginaries of their home countries and Eastern Europe, Ginnerskov-Dahlberg illustrates the importance of considering how places are imbued with meanings. Her results suggest that Eastern European students in Denmark grew up with a profound sense of living in a peripheral country vis-à-vis Western Europe. Such differences in perceived possibilities between places motivate students to move to a different place – and thereby contribute to creating and maintaining *social inequalities* between places. Similarly to Raghuram, Breines, and Gunter (2023), Ginnerskov-Dahlberg promotes a relational understanding of places. This entails the anti-essentialist premise that places do not exist independently from individuals but that the material realities of places are always interpreted, comprehended, and produced socially (cf. Riaño 2017).

In a similar vein, Ahrens (2024) discusses how students’ *valuations* of place shape ISM. Drawing on 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with students in British and Indian branch campuses in Dubai, she demonstrates that place valuations are associated with security, gender, economic, social, and symbolic factors that influence students’ choices of study locations. Ahrens finds that students value Dubai as a study location because of the prestige of its institutions, the city’s reputation, the geographical proximity to students’ families, the safeness of the place, and the post-study job opportunities it offers. Her article also highlights the *social inequalities* that are generated by nationality-based policies: in Dubai, policies concerning study fees, housing, health, and visa discriminate against international students depending on their nationality. These modes of discrimination create a social hierarchy among them. Three main student groups are present on branch campus universities: local Emirati students, long-term resident non-Emirati students, and international students who came to Dubai for higher education. While Emirati students benefit from free education at federal universities, prioritised hiring due to Emiratisation policies, and access to generous social welfare (including free housing and universal healthcare), the other students do not enjoy these benefits but instead study at international branch campuses where they must pay high tuition fees. For instance, Indian students’ families take out large loans to finance the costs of their children studying in Dubai, which are roughly five times higher than in India. Still, they often do so because their offspring cannot get admission to their preferred study programme at the prestigious Indian universities. In that sense, Ahrens’ analysis highlights that ISM originates from opportunities differing across *geographical locations*. Her study also illustrates that students’ chances of obtaining a visa to work in Dubai after completing their studies are often uncertain. Although recent policies permit them to continue residing in Dubai, they are rarely able to get well-paid jobs and afford the high living costs in Dubai. Overall, Ahrens’ analysis demonstrates that place-specific regulations can create a stratification of rights

among students depending on their nationality, which may result in substantial social inequalities.

Using a conjoint experiment with 1,890 first-year university students and 407 Erasmus exchange students at a Spanish public university, Levatino (2022) explores how study abroad destination choices relate to spatial, cultural, and symbolic aspects of places. Conjoint analysis refers to designs in which respondents are asked to rate, rank, or choose between profiles, which randomly vary across a series of attributes. For Levatino, such methods allow for estimating in an unbiased way the isolated effects of *geographical locations* and the *meanings* attributed by students to such locations on choosing their study destination. Her analysis shows that the strength of the varied attributes differs depending on the background of the respondents regarding their own international experience, which also points to *social inequalities*. Levatino suggests that there are important differences in preferences between students who have already completed international stays abroad and/or have been educated in an international environment ('cosmopolitan students') and those students who have not had these kinds of international experiences. Being more used to an international environment, cosmopolitan students feel less uncertainty concerning ISM and are therefore less afraid of the difficulty of studying at a foreign university. Her results also show that students who perform particularly well academically ('excellent students') place more importance on the reputation of the host university (an attribute related to future rewards) than students with poorer academic performance. In contrast to her expectations, the importance assigned to the leisure dimension does not differ significantly across the examined subgroups of students. Levatino concludes that a conjoint experimental approach constitutes a promising avenue for future research because it allows researchers to examine the role of different aspects of places in the mobility decisions of students and other types of migrants.

Vögtle and Windzio (2022) use longitudinal social network analysis to investigate ISM patterns from a global perspective, including South-to-South and North-to-South mobility. They analyse data from all independent countries which were acknowledged as such by the United Nations (UN) in January 2019 and had a higher education sector in place. They find that fragile institutions in places of origin act as a push factor by increasing outbound ISM. A higher level of institutional fragility of a place also has a robustly negative effect on the influx of international students. Importantly, this is the case independently of the economic performance of the host country. In contrast, a good reputation of a higher education system increases the influx of international students. Vögtle and Windzio also highlight the *social inequalities* associated with places by showing that institutional fragility, on average, is higher in countries of the Global South than in countries of the Global North. Thus, global economic inequality and institutional differences between countries of the Global South and the Global North matter greatly for explaining the direction and extent of inbound and outbound ISM. Although the central role of institutions and trust in economic transactions was well-known in institutional economics beforehand, it had not yet been systematically analysed in previous research on ISM. Consequently, investigating the fragility and stability of state institutions is an important new perspective for research on ISM.

Börjesson, Bryntesson, and Haru (2024) present a geometric data analysis based on a survey of 6,617 Swedish Erasmus exchange students who applied for an exchange during the years 2014 and 2015. They examine how both the *physical characteristics* as well as *meanings* and *valuations* of places influenced international students' destination choices. Börjesson and colleagues also show that the geographical position of a country, and the different possibilities it offers to students in terms of climate, academic quality, and socio-cultural opportunities are important factors for ISM decisions. Many Swedish students favour lively metropolises over smaller places because of the variety of cultural possibilities that the former offer. Others prefer universities with high symbolic value regarding prestige and ranking over less well-known universities, and therefore accept less culturally appealing destinations to gain access to prestigious institutions. However, the most popular destinations tend to combine these characteristics, attracting students because of both their cultural appeal and the availability of well-regarded institutions. In academic terms, the Nordic

countries, the Netherlands, and Belgium are valued for academic factors such as the reputation, quality, and the learning styles offered by their universities. The Mediterranean countries, on the other hand, are valued more for their geographic location, culture, and language. This makes academic institutions a prime mobility motive for students going to Northern Europe, while country and city characteristics are more important for choosing host destinations in Southern Europe. Finally, countries such as Germany and the UK, are valued as both academic *and* cultural destinations. Countries such as France and Italy are characterised by great internal diversity in that their cities and institutions are valued because of different factors. All this highlights the importance of understanding the reputation of institutions regarding their academic characteristics, geographical location, linguistic profile, and overall position in the international hierarchy of countries and higher education systems.

Overall, the contributions to this special issue show that studying ISM from three interrelated dimensions of place – (a) the *physical characteristics* of place, (b) the *meanings and valuations* of place, and (c) *social inequalities* associated with place – has great potential for explaining students' mobility decisions, the direction and extent of inbound and outbound ISM flows, how places become physically and socially constructed by international students, and how places reproduce and/or generate social inequalities between and within different student groups.

Directions for future research

The contributions of this special issue highlight several avenues for future research on the role of place in ISM. To begin with, much of the existing literature on the role of place in ISM has focused on major destination countries such as Canada, Australia, the USA, and the UK (e.g. Arkoudis et al. 2019; Elturki et al. 2019). However, 'new' destinations are also gaining increasing attention in research on ISM. Countries such as Morocco (e.g. Galal 2024) and South Africa (e.g. Raghuram, Breines, and Gunter 2023) receive significant numbers of students in Africa, as does Argentina in Latin America (e.g. France 24 2024). New regional hubs have emerged recently, including, for example, Uganda in East Africa (e.g. Amutuhair 2023), Malaysia in Southeast Asia (e.g. Vuong et al. 2021), and Dubai in the Middle East (e.g. Ahrens 2024), attracting students from neighbouring countries and beyond (e.g. Lee, Jon, and Byun 2017). Comparisons between these different sites, across the Global North and South, are still scarce, but they provide a broader understanding of the different experiences of students globally.

In fact, the field would benefit from further studies adopting an internationally comparative perspective. Leaving aside some exceptions (inter alia the analysis by Vögtle and Windzio 2022 in this special issue), the existing literature has often focused on how experiences vary according to students' nationalities within specific destination countries (e.g. Heng 2019). Further comparative studies on how the physical characteristics of different places and institutions (Vögtle and Windzio 2023) as well as the meanings and values ascribed to these places affect students' experiences and trajectories would be an important step towards improving our understanding of the role of place in ISM.

Research on ISM could also advance through comprehensive simultaneous analyses of the role of both origin and destination places for ISM dynamics (for examples, see, e.g. Beine, Noël, and Ragot 2014; Vögtle and Windzio 2016, 2022, 2023; Weber and Van Mol 2023).

Current scholarship on ISM also tends to neglect the complexity of international students' spatial trajectories. Rather than simply moving between two specific countries, international students' spatial trajectories may lead them across multiple places of origin and destination, thus also including places of transition. For instance, recent studies on multiple migrations highlight that a destination can be a final site, but it might also be an interim site through which students move as part of an onward migration pathway (e.g. Ahrens 2024; Paul and Yeoh 2021; Zijlstra 2021). It is therefore important to study students' spatial trajectories and how different places impact their life trajectories in an accumulating manner.

This also implies that to improve our understanding of how place influences ISM dynamics, longitudinal research designs are urgently needed. Such designs are of interest to both quantitative and qualitative researchers, as they add a temporal dimension to debates on the role of place in ISM. After all, ISM decision-making processes and places are produced over (a sometimes substantial) time (e.g. Carlson 2013). So far, however, most existing studies on the role of place in ISM adopt cross-sectional research designs, which limits a comprehensive understanding of how places shape ISM processes, and how ISM influences places.

Future research on the role of place in ISM would also benefit from data linkages, whereby large nonspatial data (e.g. on the socio-economic characteristics of students, income after graduation, etc.) and spatial data (e.g. on students' origin and destination countries and/or HEIs) are merged. This can be attained, for instance, by extending geodatabases, such as the one exploited by Börjesson, Bryntesson, and Haru (2024). Such data linkages would allow for more fine-grained analyses of the role of place in ISM, and of the associated experiences and outcomes of leaving and moving to specific places.

From a social stratification perspective, it would also be relevant to study in more detail how the varying endowments of different geographical locations with resources and their differential meanings contribute to generating social inequalities. For instance, different places offer different (national, regional, and institutional) opportunity structures for studying abroad (Beine, Noël, and Ragot 2014; Caruso and de Wit 2015; Rodríguez González, Bustillo Mesanza, and Mariel 2011). Importantly, such opportunity structures may influence the international mobility of students from different social strata in different ways (Entrich, Netz, and Matsuoka 2024). Furthermore, study destinations may be considered either more or less exclusive, e.g. depending on how far they are away from the home country (geographically or culturally), on how many other fellow students sojourn there, or in terms of the educational or economic prestige of the study location. Stays in very exclusive study abroad destinations may constitute stronger signals of social distinction, which could contribute to sustaining or increasing social inequalities if such signals were acquired primarily by already privileged students.

Many studies on ISM focus on the micro-level, with a primary aim to understand why students decide to study abroad. As outlined in the introduction, far less attention had been devoted to how students choose their destinations and how different destinations might affect their experiences and strategies. Micro-level approaches provide ample conceptual and methodological opportunities to model and empirically examine place-specific aspects – not only on the micro level, but also on the meso level and, with (internationally comparable) data, on the macro level. This potential has hardly been exploited thus far, perhaps in part due to lack of appropriate data. Studies exploiting this potential would further advance our scientific understanding of ISM.

Finally, as Raghuram, Breines, and Gunter (2023) have illustrated, there is still a dearth of theoretical work on the role of places (and also non-places) in ISM. Theory building is thus a task for future research in the field. Our conceptualisations of the role of place have also been challenged since the Covid-19 pandemic due to the expansion of hybrid forms of ISM. The campus is no longer exclusively the place that students inhabit and where they learn. This special issue recognises how places can hold meaning even if at a distance, and how places could come to matter in distance education. As international education at a distance emerges as a third category between internationalisation at home and ISM, it is worth noting the complexities that hybrid forms of education offer to conceptualisations of place (Mittelmeier et al. 2021).

We look forward to seeing a reinvigorated debate on the role of place in ISM that addresses some of the highlighted lacunae.

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