

Toward a Framework for (Re)Thinking the Ethics and Politics of International Student Mobility

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Abstract

In recent years, scholarship on international student mobility (ISM) has proliferated across various social science disciplines. Of late, an interest in the *ethics* and *politics* of ISM seems to be emerging, as more scholars begin to consider critically questions about rights, responsibility, justice, equality, and so forth that inhere in the thorny relationships between ISM stakeholders. To date, however, these discussions remain largely scattered. Bringing together these scattered conversations in literature, this article outlines elements of a framework for (re)thinking the ethics and politics of ISM. The proposed framework identifies eight key ISM actors between whom various ethical and political relationships arise, where these relationships range from the social to the institutional. Furthermore, the framework discusses four sets of concepts from the literature deemed pertinent in thinking further about ISM ethics and politics. This proposed framework is aimed at stimulating further conversations and efforts to make ISM more socially equitable and sustainable.

Keywords

international student mobility, higher education, international education, ethics, politics

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the Anglophone academia has seen a rising research interest in international students in higher education, as witnessed in a proliferation of related scholarship across various social science disciplines. This development reflects

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the steep rise of international student mobility (ISM) since the 1990s. Worldwide, the number of “internationally mobile students”—defined as those who pursue tertiary/higher education outside their countries of citizenship (Migration Data Portal, 2018)—had risen from 1.3 million in 1993 (OECD, 2013) to more than 4.85 million in 2016 (UNESCO, cited in Migration Data Portal, 2018). This figure has been projected by OECD to grow further to 8 million by 2025 (Dennis, 2018).

Educational scholarship has tended to focus on issues arising from international students’ encounter with unfamiliar teaching/learning environments, and more broadly, sociocultural environments in the host-country contexts. Among other things, this scholarship has highlighted the vulnerability of international students, which led to discussions about their security and well-being. Considerations of the *ethical* and *political* dimensions of international education are implicit in many such discussions. Of late, a more explicit interest in the questions of ethics seems to be burgeoning among scholars of international education (e.g., Pashby & Andreotti, 2016; Stein, 2016; Stein & Andreotti, 2016). Meanwhile, as more researchers from beyond the field of education (for example, geography, sociology, and migration studies) started to research on internationally mobile students, a more heterogeneous body of scholarship has also emerged (King et al., 2010; Wells, 2014). In this inter-/multidisciplinary corpus, researchers too have grappled with inherently ethical and political questions such as the relationships between mobile students and their education intermediaries or providers, or the structural relationship between ISM and the reproduction of social privilege and inequalities (e.g., Waters, 2018b; Yang, 2018a, 2018b).

Responding to this recent convergence of scholarly interest in the ethical and political dimensions of ISM, this article presents elements of a framework for (re)thinking these thorny issues through reflecting on a diverse set of empirical literature about international students. In this article, following Stein (2016), *ethics* is defined as a relational domain, where “[e]thical commitments are informed by particular conceptualizations of relationality (and/or the denial of relationality)” (p. 7). *Politics*, on the other hand, shall refer broadly to issues involving relations of power or domination. Ethics and politics are often addressed simultaneously in this article because, as Stein (2016) aptly points out, these two notions

are intimately intertwined. That is, ethical frameworks are not articulated or enacted in political vacuums; rather, ethics are formulated, situated, and negotiated within and between particular socio-historical contexts, collectivities, subjectivities, and power relations. Thus, politics are not supplemental to ethics, but instead centrally inform the context, content, and framing of any particular ethical approach or engagement. (p. 7)

This intertwining between ethics and politics shall become clearer as the article develops. In what follows, the next section provides a review of literature on international students to illustrate some of the ways in which issues of ethics and politics have been prefigured in past scholarship, and how they have emerged to the fore in recent research. The subsequent section lays bare two broad theoretical perspectives underpinning critical interrogations of ISM ethics and politics. The article then proceeds to sketch out elements of a framework for (re)thinking the ethics and politics of ISM. It

concludes by summarizing the article's arguments and calling for more research into ISM ethics and politics in order to make ISM and educational internationalization more socially equitable and sustainable.

Literature on International Students: Locating Ethics and Politics

Earlier educational research on international students, apart from those focused on pedagogy or teaching/learning, paid significant attention to international students' experiences of "acculturation"/"adaptation"/"adjustment" in the host countries (see Page & Chahboun, 2019, for a critical review). This line of work stemmed from prevalent observations about international students' cultural maladjustment and social isolation in the host environment, especially their apparent failure to establish meaningful engagement with host communities. However, this scholarship was soon critiqued for perpetuating a "deficit view" that assumes international students to be inherently lacking, incompetent, and therefore needing to adapt to the host (e.g., Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). Implicitly, the ethics and politics of intercultural encounter and adjustment are at stake because international students and their host are in asymmetrical relations of power and resources. Increasingly, research on international students' intercultural experiences seems to demonstrate greater awareness of the ethical and political nature of intercultural interactions. For example, the two-way or reciprocal nature of "adaption" (e.g., Ata et al., 2018; Tran, 2011) is becoming recognized; sometimes, more neutral terms such as "transition" (Ploner, 2018) are used instead of "adaptation."

Meanwhile, the intercultural scholarship on international students has also helped to highlight the vulnerability of this particular student population (Sherry et al., 2010). Due to reasons such as their legal outsider status, information gap, communication difficulties, and cultural differences, mobile international students live what Marginson (2012, p. 498) calls an "uncertain, vulnerable, and de-powered existence." With this appreciation of international student vulnerability, Marginson and his colleagues have explored extensively issues of international student "security" and "well-being" (Marginson et al., 2010; Ramia et al., 2013). Defining international student security as international students' "maintenance of a stable capacity for self-determining human agency" (Marginson et al., 2010, p. 60), Marginson and colleagues make references to moral philosophy (for example, drawing on Amartya Sen) as well as global moral-political discourses and institutions (such as those associated with the United Nations). In fact, for Marginson and colleagues, international students' experiences and vulnerabilities ought to be viewed from the prism of human rights (Marginson, 2012). In other words, international student issues are, at a deeper level, matters of politics and ethics.

Beyond the field of education, in the multidisciplinary ISM scholarship, student mobility has been approached from a variety of analytical or theoretical perspectives. For example, some ISM researchers view student mobility as a type of migration (e.g., King & Raghuram, 2013; Raghuram, 2013), hence examining, among other issues, the

roles played by the educational intermediaries (e.g., Collins, 2012), social networks (e.g., Beech, 2015), and sociocultural imaginaries (e.g., Beech, 2014) in constituting and mediating ISM. Another major strand of ISM research applies a Bourdieusian lens on class and analyzes student mobility as a trans-border strategy used by privileged social classes for cultural capital accumulation and social reproduction (e.g., Waters, 2012; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Again, questions of ethics and politics are germane to these perspectives, yet they have so far remained implicit and relatively underexplored. For instance, research on educational intermediaries seems only burgeoning (see Baas, 2019), and more questions can be asked about the ethicality of intermediary or brokerage. Similarly, the Bourdieusian analysis of the role of ISM in re/producing privilege and inequalities is also a deeply political perspective, yet it has seldom been considered under a common framework with existing discourses on ethics and politics in the international student literature.

Regardless of discipline or field, some of the most recently published studies (e.g., Phan, 2017; Waters, 2018b; Yang, 2018a) seem to show that ethical and political concerns are emerging into sharper focus as ISM and international education continue to evolve empirically. For instance, in her recent work on English-medium instructed (EMI) higher education programs in Vietnam which attracted mobile students from other Asian developing countries, Phan (2017) documents the disturbingly “mediocre” program quality and student experiences that resulted from a neocolonialist desire for “Western”/English-medium education in Asia. In a similar vein, Yang’s (2018a) study about Indian students enrolled in a poorly run English-medium medical degree program at a provincial university in China revealed ethically questionable practices which are nevertheless tolerated by all parties involved due to pragmatism. In an article titled “International Education Is political!” Waters (2018b) draws on her research into U.K. transnational education (TNE) programs in Hong Kong to argue passionately for the case of paying more attention to the ethics and politics of international education. Reflecting on the problematic experiences of the Hong Kong students enrolled in British TNE programs, Waters urges, “[s]orely lacking is an understanding of the sense of political and social responsibility that universities should have for ‘their’ international students” (p. 1463).

Taken together, it seems that while previous scholarship has addressed ISM ethics and politics mostly implicitly, there is now a renewed interest and urgency to explore these issues more explicitly. In an attempt to think schematically and cross-disciplinarily about these issues, this article shall draw from different strands of literature to benefit from their diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical insights.

Critical Perspectives Underpinning ISM Ethics and Politics: Neoliberalism and Postcolonialism

Underpinning various discussions about ISM ethics and politics in existing scholarship, arguably, are two broad theoretical perspectives: one pertaining to neoliberalism, the other, postcolonial. These two perspectives not only describe the specific socio-historical contexts to ethical and political issues in contemporary ISM, they also

constitute the very critical intellectual lenses through which scholars have looked into these questions to date.

Neoliberalism as a philosophy and rationality of governance emphasizing the virtue of private enterprise and the superiority of market mechanism has had profound impacts on higher education worldwide, especially in the capitalist West (Olssen & Peters, 2005). There is no space to dwell on neoliberalism here, but in relation to educational internationalization and ISM specifically, one key consequence of neoliberalization has been the extensive commodification of higher education and the marketization of educational mobility (Altbach, 2015; Sidhu, 2006), particularly in the Anglophone world. Faced with public funding cuts and exhorted by the neoliberal states to become enterprising actors in a lucrative global education industry (Komljenovic & Robertson, 2017; Eggins & West, 2010), higher education institutions (HEIs) in (but not limited to) the English-speaking world have increasingly come to view international students as a source of tuition fee income, or “cash cow” as many scholars have critically put it (e.g., Baas, 2006; Cantwell, 2015; Robertson, 2011; Stein & Andreotti, 2016).

This neoliberal positioning of higher education as a profit-driven industry and correlative of international students as a source of profit has various ethical and political implications. At best, under the neoliberal ethos, both international students and their host HEIs begin to view their relationship as one between customer/consumer on one hand and service-provider on the other. This arguably impoverishes the educational/pedagogical relationship by reducing it to a transactional relation entailing mainly provider “duties” and “consumer rights” (Jakubowicz & Monani, 2010; Ramia et al., 2013; Tran & Nyland, 2018; Waters, 2018b). At its worst, the neoliberalization of ISM could bring up controversial questions that unsettle some of the social ideals about education as well as political values said to be fundamental to liberal democratic societies. For instance, when international students are viewed chiefly as cash cows, should then different and lower admission standards be applied to them to maximize recruitment? Should international students be providing de facto financial subsidies to domestic students through paying significantly higher tuition fees, as some scholars have previously questioned (Enslin & Hedge, 2008; Tannock, 2013). And, should international students then be denied opportunities to claim citizenship—*formal* or *informal* (see Yang, Baidon, & Sim, 2018)—in the host countries as soon as their economic utility has been exploited? Such are several examples of the pointed questions that scholars have asked about the ethics and politics of ISM from a critical perspective on neoliberalism.

The other major perspective from which scholars have examined ISM ethics and politics is the postcolonial (Andreotti, 2011). Simply put, the postcolonial perspective draws attention to the enduring legacies of centuries of Western political and economic dominance of the world—realized through colonialism—and how these continue to structure uneven power relations between countries, cultures, and peoples in the *contemporary* world. In education, as Stein and Andreotti (2016) point out, this is expressed in a dominant global imaginary that “presumes the superiority and universality of Western knowledge and therefore, of Western education” (p. 231). They note that it is this imaginary that “makes Western higher education a desirable

product in the global higher education market” (p. 235) whereby “it is relatively undisputed that the universities with the most prestige and resources in the stratified global higher education landscape are predominantly located in the Global North” (p. 231). Such an asymmetry of power between the West and the “rest” is manifest in patterns of ISM flows too: more than half of the world’s tertiary international students hail from Asia, and their preferred destination remain predominantly Anglophone and European countries (UNESCO, 2013). Aptly, Bolsmann and Miller (2008) see Western HEIs’ current dominance of educational internationalization and ISM as “a continuation of former imperial and political connections that have evolved into financially beneficial markets and sources of income for western universities” (p. 80). In other words, the neoliberal commodification of international education and ISM is deeply embedded in a postcolonial (some say neocolonial, see Altbach, 2015) global HE landscape.

Apart from illuminating the global geometries of power underlying macro ISM flows, the postcolonial perspective has also allowed scholars to examine the ways in which power asymmetries percolate into international students’ lived experiences. For instance, as Madge et al. (2009) put it, “the walls of the lecture room are inevitably porous” in the sense that “wider international power relations and inequalities structure both the teaching practices and the knowledge content of pedagogical practice” (p. 40). Thus, they (Madge et al., 2009) advocate an “engaged pedagogy” that seeks essentially to de-colonize the relationships between the mobile students and their host institutions both within and beyond the pedagogical context. Similarly, Lomer (2018) critiques the learning approaches in the U.K. HE system for being “informed by an elitist, imperial history” (p. 56), for failing to adapt pedagogy and curricula to international students, and for arrogantly constructing the latter as subjects of “deficit” who are responsible to adapt. Indeed, much of the intercultural literature on international students can also be reexamined in postcolonial light, which foregrounds the deep-seated and often unquestioned power asymmetries. Even the most prosaic fact such as English being the default language of international education can be questioned ethically and politically, given that research has shown how English proficiency can impinge on non-English-speaking international students’ senses of security (Sawir et al., 2012) and dignity (Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2011).

What becomes clear from the above discussion is that in addition to serving as two powerful lenses to focus on ethical and political issues in ISM, the neoliberal and postcolonial perspectives are often deeply imbricated. Furthermore, it is also evident that ethics and politics are indeed intimately intertwined matters—sometimes two sides of the same coin—for when asking about the ethicality of certain relations (“right or wrong?”; “good or bad?”) it is difficult to remain indifferent to the broad structures of power and dominance that enfold them.

Elements of a Framework for ISM Ethics and Politics: Key Actors and Useful Concepts

In this section, elements of a framework for (re)thinking ISM ethics and politics will be sketched out. First, a list of key ISM actors are identified, with their roles and

relationships considered. This is followed by discussions of four sets of concepts thought to be pertinent and instrumental.

Key ISM Actors

Arguably, in considering the ethics and politics of ISM, there are eight key actors: (a) mobile students, (b) educational intermediaries (e.g., agents/brokers, typically from the private sector), (c) education providers—from both public and private sectors, (d) sending-country communities, (e) sending-country policymakers/regulators, (f) receiving-country communities, (g) receiving-country policymaker/regulators, and (h) international/global governance bodies or mechanisms. Importantly, none of these actors is a singular or homogeneous entity, but each to some extent is an internally plural and heterogeneous player. For example, just as “not all international students are the same” (Choudaha et al., 2012), the receiving-country communities also run the gamut from small-scale communities such as the local students and faculty bodies in host HEIs to wider communities such as the host-city populations and the broader “national society.” It is in the multitude of possible relationships between these eight actors, sometimes even between subgroups within an “actor,” that issues of ethical and political import are situated (Figure 1). Here, it may be useful to see these numerous ISM relationships as located on a spectrum between the *social* at one end and the *institutional* at the other.

Social relationships in ISM include mainly those relationships between individuals, groups, and communities. Thus, how international students involve intermediaries to mediate their educational mobility; how they rely on and stay connected with their home-country communities after going abroad; how international students relate to their host-country counterparts; how they interact with teaching staff in host HEIs; how international students of different backgrounds interact among themselves; and how international students are received by and in turn engage with host-country communities at various levels are some examples of the social relationships in ISM.

At the other end of the spectrum are institutional relationships that obtain between sovereign or subsovereign institutional actors (e.g., government agencies, local authorities) and/or organizational actors, whether public or private in nature (e.g., HEIs and educational agencies). Thus, such relationships may include, for instance, how sending-/receiving-country states govern educational intermediaries; how the receiving-country state guides and regulates its education providers who recruit and teach international students; how sending and receiving states work together on policies regarding student mobility; and so on. One important actor not to be left out is international/global governance bodies or mechanisms. On the issue of international student rights, Marginson (2012) argues that “global governance and regulation are under-developed” (p. 507). Nevertheless, the recent promulgation by the European Association for International Education (n.d.) of an *International Student Mobility Charter*, with a distinct emphasis on ethical conduct, seems a positive sign that the gap identified by Marginson (2012) is receiving attention. Therefore, future discussions of

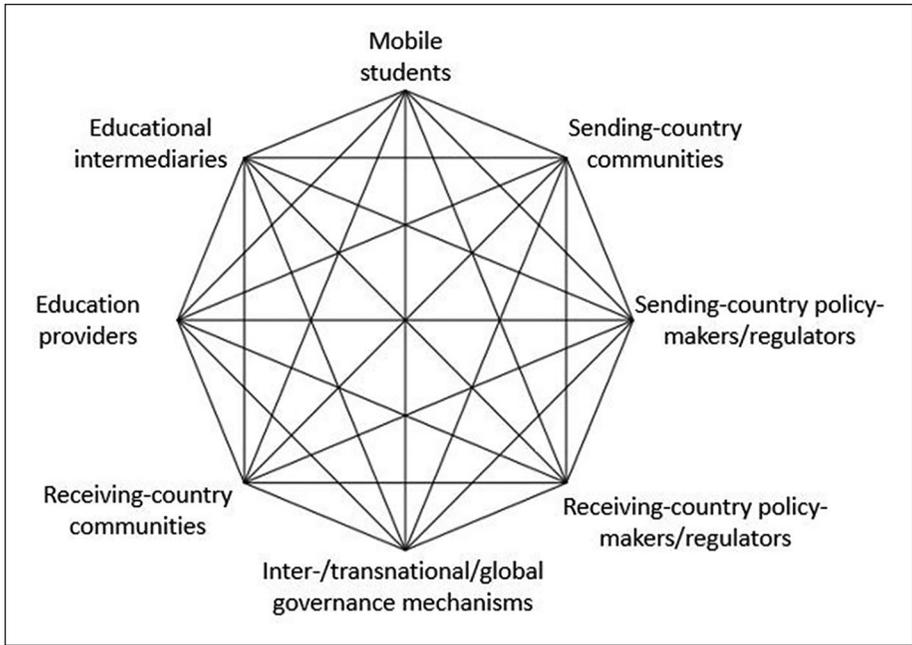


Figure 1. Key ISM actors.
 Note. ISM = international student mobility.

ISM ethics and politics would do well to integrate this supranational/global actor, which can involve both governmental and non-governmental entities.

In ISM relationships on the *social* end of the spectrum, arguably *ethics* is heightened because at question is how different social actors behave toward and relate to each other in social contexts. In contrast, in ISM relationships deemed more *institutional* in nature, *politics*, or more precisely *political economy*, is foregrounded because actors’ interactions revolve around politics, policy-making, and regulation of private economic actors. Nonetheless, just as any separation of ethics and politics in the current context is false, the distinction between social and institutional ISM relationships is also artificial. In reality, the social/ethical and the institutional/politico-economic are co-constitutive: broad national politics, policies, and institutional processes can powerfully shape micro social interactions and experiences on the ground; conversely, bottom-up social dynamics and sentiments can also feed into political, policy, and institutional processes.

Confronting these multitudinous relationships between various ISM actors and therein the ethical and political questions, the next section identifies and discusses four sets of pertinent concepts from recent literature as possible elements of a framework for further thinking about these questions. In discussing these concepts, research gaps and opportunities are also pointed out to suggest potential directions for future research.

Concepts for Further Thinking ISM Ethics and Politics

Rights and responsibility. In considering ISM ethics and politics, inevitably the ideas of rights and responsibility have featured. Owing to the visibility of international student vulnerability, existing discourse on rights has tended to focus on mobile students, whereas responsibilities are mostly associated with the education providers and host-country actors.

Perhaps reflecting the neoliberal hegemony in international higher education, scholars found that student rights are prevailingly conceptualized in terms of consumer rights, and such a notion appears to be strongly internalized by international students themselves (Jakubowicz & Monani, 2010; Tran & Nyland, 2018). At the core of this neoliberal consumerist understanding of international student rights is *education rights*, which Tran and Nyland (2018) define as “the right to be provided with high-quality teaching and learning and with adequate resources to support learning” (p. 130). While a quality education is indispensable to an ethical student–provider relationship, this alone is insufficient. As Marginson and colleagues have argued in their numerous works (e.g., Marginson, 2012), student rights can and should be viewed as an issue of human rights, and thus many more social and political actors are implicated potentially. This represents an important shift from a predominantly *legal* framing of rights to a *moral–political* framing.

Mobile international students’ rights imply *responsibilities* on the part of the education providers and policymaker/regulators in both sending and receiving contexts. Some scholars have explored such responsibilities from policy and regulatory angles in connection with international students’ security and well-being (Marginson et al., 2010; Ramia et al., 2013). Others have used postcolonialism-informed concepts such as “geographies of responsibility” to probe Western HEIs’ responsibilities to care for international students pedagogically and socially (Madge et al., 2009; Waters, 2018b). What remains missing seems any direct discussion about the responsibilities of various receiving-country communities (although the intercultural literature has touched on this to some extent) and, more urgently, the rights and responsibilities between mobile students and educational intermediaries.

Furthermore, in a recent study, Tran and Vu (2017) suggested the need to see international students as also *bearers* of responsibilities in addition to rights—a perspective seldom explored so far. Indeed, in considering ISM ethics and politics, one must resist the tendency to assume international students to be always the victims (see Baas, 2014). Mobile students ought to be accountable for their own actions and how they relate to other ISM actors as well. Thus, moving forward, a well-rounded and balanced conception of rights and responsibilities as matters of mutuality between *all* ISM actors seems necessary.

Hospitality and reciprocity. The notions of *hospitality* (e.g., Ploner, 2018) and *reciprocity* (e.g., Ata et al., 2018) have also surfaced in recent scholarship. These two closely related concepts are particularly useful in thinking about the *social* interactions that make up mobile international students’ everyday experiences in both academic and nonacademic settings.

Ploner (2018), following Bennett's (2000) seminal work on "academic hospitality" and Phipps and Barnett's (2007) development of this work (both works cited in Ploner, 2018), describes academic hospitality as involving "openness and reciprocity towards others by way of *sharing* and *receiving*, and by developing meaningful conversations with knowledges that are perceived as 'other' or opposite to one's own beliefs, ethics and values" (p. 4; emphases original). Applying this concept to a group of international postgraduate students undergoing transition to U.K. higher education, Ploner (2018) examined various concrete forms in which academic hospitality took shape for these students, including material, virtual, epistemological, linguistic, and touristic hospitalities. While the overwhelmingly positive transitioning experiences reported in the study was somewhat surprising, it nevertheless provides useful empirical pointers for future explorations of what "hospitality" might mean in relation to ISM.

In Ploner's study as well as in commonsense understanding, hospitality is a mode of relating between the host and the guest, where the host is assumed to be in a position of power, capable of giving or withdrawing hospitality. However, the guest–host relation in ISM need not be a one-way street: Upon receiving hospitality, the guest may respond appropriately to reciprocate the goodwill; the guest could also act out hospitality by welcoming the host into their own communities and lifeworlds. In other words, hospitality can in fact be *reciprocal*, involving "dialogic mutuality" (Ata et al., 2018, p. 13). Importantly, as Ata et al (2018, p. 6) point out, a reciprocal relationship need not be symmetrical; the key is *mutuality*, whereby genuine communications and exchanges take place.

Justice and equality. Questions about justice and equality have been addressed from time to time in the international higher education literature, often in studies about policies. Scholars like Enslin and Hedge (2008) and more recently Tannock (2013, 2018) have converged on questioning what the commodification of ISM in Western HE landscape has meant for social justice and educational equality. Arguing that education is a global public good in a globalized world, Enslin and Hedge (2008) maintain that treating international students as cash cows and outsiders goes against the principles of global justice and educational equality—values which many Western HEIs claim to subscribe to. Similarly, Tannock's (2013) argument is that "national-level ideals of educational equality can and should be extended outward, as part of a broader push for the equitable treatment of international students worldwide" (p. 450). Here, at least two distinct but related subquestions about justice and equality present themselves: simply put, one is whether it is just for international students to be treated so differently—*unfavorably*—compared with domestic students in the host countries; the other is how the financial inaccessibility of ISM is linked to social inequalities in mobile students' sending contexts. Noting these controversies and contradictions, Tannock (2013, p. 458) asks with passion: "why should we allow our own institutions of higher education to promote inequalities of educational opportunity for those who grow up beyond our national borders when we stand firmly opposed—in principle at least—to allowing them to do this at home? Is there not something essentially hypocritical about this?" Evidently, these arguments are premised on a cosmopolitan understanding of

educational justice and equality as global concerns, which may be considered by some to be idealistic.

These authors are not alone in pointing out the connections between ISM and social inequalities. For some time, human geographers and sociologists have investigated how ISM contributes to the reproduction of class inequality and feeds into social stratification (e.g., Waters, 2012, 2018a; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Some have also observed that mobility is “overwhelmingly pursued by privileged individuals” (Waters et al., 2011 p. 460). While this observation still holds true largely, recent research (e.g., Yang, 2018a) has shown that students from a much wider socioeconomic spectrum as well as geographical locations are gaining access to ISM, thus complicating the image of “privilege” attached to international educational mobility. This, however, does not necessarily nullify aforementioned concerns about justice and equality. Yang’s (2018b) recent work finds that “accompanying this wider access to educational mobility is a clear *class-differentiation* within this mobility field” (p. 735; emphasis original). In other words, new forms of injustice and inequality are created as ISM becomes more commonplace. Thus, future researchers need continuously to monitor how ISM and social (in)justice/(in)equality articulate in new contexts.

In thinking about justice and equality in ISM, one should also avoid a one-sided vision. Although existing scholarship has indeed tended to put critical scrutiny on education providers and host-country actors while portraying mobile students as exploited, what kinds of justice/equality-related questions actually arise should ultimately be an empirical question, depending on the specificity of the case. Yang’s (2014a, 2014c, 2016a, 2018b) research on Chinese youth studying in Singapore on the latter’s government-funded scholarships shows that when mobile international students are perceived to be privileged *at the expense* of the locals, the host-society communities may begin to question the justice and equity of such a form of state-sponsored ISM.

Desire and recognition. Finally, in recent years, various perspectives centered around the notion of “desire” seem to have gained momentum in research on ISM and international education (Chow & Yang, 2019; Chowdhury & Phan, 2014; Collins et al., 2014; Motha & Lin, 2014; Phan, 2017; Yang, 2016a). Inspired eclectically by philosophy and psychoanalysis, these “desire” perspectives offer unique insights into ISM ethics and politics.

For Chowdhury and Phan (2014) as well as Motha and Lin (2014), the teaching of English to non-English-speaking international students is a site suffused with desire. As Motha and Lin (2014) observe, the desire for English is in fact indexical of desires “for the identities represented by particular accents and varieties of English; for capital, power, and images that are associated with English; for what is believed to lie beyond the doors that English unlocks” (p. 32). In turn, such a desire not only underpins a lucrative global TESOL industry, but also deeply structures international students’ subjective experiences, often compelling them and their families “to make tremendous, sometimes unfathomable sacrifices in order to gain access to the language” (Motha & Lin, 2014, p. 332). Motha and Lin (2014) highlight how, as a product of *power* both macro and micro, “desire can be manipulated in exploitative or unethical ways” (p. 331).

Through exposing the desire underlying abusive and exploitative practices, and bringing such desire to consciousness and deconstructing it, authors like Chowdhury and Phan (2014) and Motha and Lin (2014) call for the reenvisioning of TESOL, and ISM more broadly, in nonmanipulative and “non-coercive” ways.

In contrast, some other scholars have emphasized the generative and productive side of desire as the basis for a *positive* ethics and politics of ISM (e.g., Collins et al., 2014; Yang, 2016a). Yang (2014b, 2016a), for instance, has interpreted international students’ cross-cultural encounters—both academic and social—as a sojourning process in which various socioculturally conditioned ‘*educational desires*’ are met, frustrated, or transformed. Viewing such complex experiences of desire as autonomous self-transformative journeys that cannot be fully appropriated by structures of power and governance, Yang argues that international students’ desires and those experiences underpinning their desires need to be acknowledged, recognized, and sympathized with. Only then could some of their apparently controversial or offensive discourse and behaviors be better understood (e.g., Yang, 2016b). Somewhat similarly, in their study, Collins et al. (2014) took the view that while “student desires are importantly objects to be governmentalised” (p. 673), namely to be harnessed by the state, ultimately desire is “recalcitrant, shifting” (p. 673) and always in a process of *becoming*. These above theorizations of student desires in ISM as becoming, as autonomous, as not fully governable or appropriable, essentially call for a deeper *recognition* of mobile international students’ subjectivity, namely their being subjects as opposed to merely objects or outcomes of objectification. Recognizing international students as *desiring subjects*, respecting their socioculturally specific desires, and interacting with them on the basis of such recognition and respect, is ultimately a matter of ethics and politics.

Conclusion

This article began by highlighting the impressive rise of ISM in recent decades, which underpinned the emergence of ISM-related research scholarship. While this scholarship continues to thrive, however, the most recent OECD data suggests a notable slowing down of the growth of ISM, where the number of internationally mobile students appears to be plateauing (ICEF Monitor, 2017). Indeed, citing various observations, international education experts Altbach and de Wit (2018) recently went as far as to claim that “‘the era of higher education internationalisation’ over the past 25 years (1990–2015) that has characterised university thinking and action might either be finished or, at least, be on life support” (n.p.). Although such dramatic predictions are speculative in nature, one cannot but be provoked into wondering about the long-term *sustainability* of ISM and, more broadly, HE internationalization. Here, the notion of sustainability goes beyond mere matters of numbers or dollars and cents, but more importantly refers to the social experiences and relationships that saturate ISM as a domain of socially, culturally, and politically embedded practices and exchanges enacted between real persons, communities, and institutions. How these practices and exchanges measure against ethical principles holds enormous implications for the future of ISM.

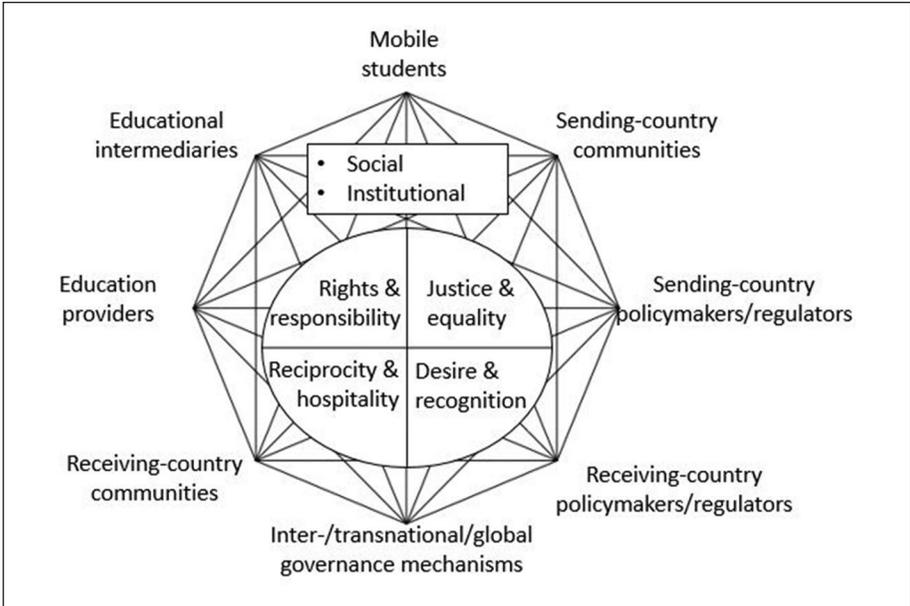


Figure 2. Elements of a framework for (re)thinking the ethics and politics of ISM.

Note. ISM = international student mobility.

Past scholarship on ISM has considered such questions of ethics and politics from time to time, but a recent reemergence and convergence of scholarly interest on these issues make it worthwhile to rethink these matters more systematically. As an effort in this direction, this article has sought to sketch out elements of an analytical framework by drawing on a diverse and multidisciplinary set of literature. It first identified two critical perspectives, centered respectively around neoliberalism and postcolonialism, as two closely related anchoring points for critical discourses on ISM ethics and politics. The article then proposed a list of eight key ISM actors between whom a multitude of relationships arise; these relationships are viewed on a spectrum between the social and institutional as a way of making sense of the complex nature of the ethical and political questions that inhere in them. The core part of the article discussed four sets of concepts which stand out from recent literature that are deemed potentially instrumental for advancing thinking about ISM ethics and politics. These four sets of concepts—rights and responsibility, hospitality and reciprocity, justice and equality, desire and recognition—are by no means the only ones deserving attention; nor are the discussions here meant to be exhaustive or comprehensive. Nevertheless, these analytically versatile and generative concepts do offer certain unique analytical perspectives and vantage points. Together with the multitudinous social and institutional relationships obtaining between various key ISM actors (Figure 2), they make up the basic elements of a framework that hopefully helps to further stimulate scholars' investigations and interrogations of ISM and international education.

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