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To cite this article: Peidong Yang (2022) Rethinking international student mobility through the lens of “crisis” at a juncture of pandemic and global uncertainties, Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 42:sup1, 20-33, DOI: [10.1080/02188791.2022.2031872](https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2022.2031872)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2022.2031872>



Published online: 15 Jun 2022.



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# Rethinking international student mobility through the lens of “crisis” at a juncture of pandemic and global uncertainties

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## ABSTRACT

International student mobility (ISM), defined as the movement of students to pursue tertiary education outside their countries of citizenship, has conventionally been understood in terms of micro social actors’ behaviours of cultural capital accumulation and macro-level institutional processes following the logics of neoliberal globalization and knowledge economy. The COVID-19 pandemic has abruptly and severely impacted ISM, plunging the latter into what seems to be a “crisis”. Taking this fluid juncture as an opportunity for reflection and re-thinking, this paper re-examines ISM through the discursive lens of “crisis”. Broadening the “crisis” perspective beyond the pandemic to include a longitudinal view over the twentieth century through to the present, the paper considers the ways in which movement and recruitment of international students may be seen as consequences of as well as responses to “crises” of various natures – geopolitical, economic, and social. The author’s own work on student mobilities in Asia is drawn upon for illustration. The paper ends by briefly considering both the immediate crises confronting ISM, as well as various broader global uncertainties lying ahead.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 October 2020  
Accepted 21 November 2021

## KEYWORDS

International student mobility; educational mobility; international education; crisis

## Introduction

Across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown many spheres of collective human life into states of suspension, disruption, or crisis. Education is no exception. According to UNESCO (2020), at the height of the crisis, as many as 1.37 billion students across 138 countries were affected by national-level school/campus closures. Owing to the nature of the pandemic as a highly infectious disease, educational activities that involve border-crossing mobilities of people have been particularly hard hit. This is especially true with respect to *international student mobility* (ISM) – defined as the flows of students to pursue tertiary education outside their countries of citizenship. In countries across the world, governments imposed travel restrictions and recalled citizens from abroad, including tertiary students (Grove, 2020; R. Ye, 2020). Higher education institutions (HEIs) suspended overseas mobility programmes such as inbound/outbound student exchange, scrambled to move teaching online, and confronted the added challenge of providing support to stranded international students (Gomes & Chang, 2020; L. Wang, 2020). Indeed, scholars have identified international students as “[o]ne of the most vulnerable population groups” (Firang, 2020, p. 1) in a pandemic situation, susceptible to difficulties such as emotional stress, loss of income (due to lockdown and/or job loss), lack of social contact, and separation from family (Bilecen, 2020; Firang, 2020). For universities, another major concern has been the jeopardized future demand of

international education from foreign students which, for many HEIs in the Anglophone world, has become an indispensable source of revenue, critical for their financial viability (Cantwell, 2015; Stein & Andreotti, 2016). International HE expert Simon Marginson remarked that ISM flows, particularly those to the West, would suffer a “massive hit”, predicting that recovery could take up to five years (Bothwell, 2020). There are also predictions that the pandemic would precipitate the restructuring of future ISM flows, although substantive projections seem to vary (Bothwell, 2020; Ross, 2020). No matter from which angle one looks, then, it seems that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, international student mobility has been plunged into “crisis”.

However, it is important to note that two years prior to the present moment of crisis, Altbach and de Wit (2018) had already opined that “[w]hat one might call ‘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.). Indeed, after more than two decades of sustained growth which saw the number of internationally mobile students increase from 1.3 million in 1990 (OECD 2013) to 5.3 million in 2017 (UNESCO, cited in migrationdataportal.org, 2020), a palpable slowing down of ISM growth became apparent at the tail-end of this trajectory, where the number of mobile students seemed to begin to plateau (ICEF Monitor, 2017). Moreover, in the several years preceding COVID-19, rising tensions between the United States (US) and China, against a broader backdrop of globalization slowing down if not reversing (The Economist, 2019a, 2019b), has also cast shadows of uncertainties over international education, and ISM in specific. In the US – the world’s top host country of ISM – the number of international students grew continuously between 2010 and 2016; but in 2017, some 31,520 fewer international students enrolled in the country compared to the previous year (Choudaha, 2018). This decline continued into academic year 2018–19 (Laws & Ammigan, 2020; Redden, 2019). Therefore, it may well be the case that ISM was already in decline before COVID-19, and the pandemic has merely exacerbated the trend.

Is international student mobility indeed in crisis? If so, what are the causes or sources of its troubles? Taking the current juncture of heightened uncertainty as an opportunity for reflection and rethinking, this paper seeks to re-examine ISM through the discursive lens of “crisis”, thus contributing to the Special Issue’s theme of crisis-education dialectic. Instead of understanding “crisis” narrowly in terms of the current pandemic, this paper adopts a broader scope to include crises of various natures – pertaining to geopolitics, economy, and social reproduction of human capital. Furthermore, with a longitudinal view – albeit a selective one – into the recent past of student mobility, the paper considers the ways in which ISM may be seen as consequences of and/or responses to these crises. Theoretically, the “crisis-perspective” advanced in this paper contrasts with and complements prevailing theorizations of ISM, which have hitherto understood it broadly in terms of capital accumulation by individual social actors and institutionalized behaviours of organizational actors following the logics of neoliberal globalization and knowledge economy.

The rest of this paper begins by first outlining the above-mentioned existing theoretical understandings of ISM. It then shifts to offer some selective and cursory glimpses into the history of student mobilities in the twentieth century through to the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC). It is argued that ISM may be considered as bound up with major geopolitical, economic, and social crises (with respect to human capital reproduction, specifically), or situations discursively framed in terms of crises. Some of the author’s own research in the contexts of China and Singapore is drawn upon for illustration. Finally, moving to the present moment and looking ahead, the paper considers both the immediate crises confronting ISM due to COVID-19, as well as longer-term uncertainties to do with global geopolitical and social restructuring, and existential threats in what some has called a “post-globalization” world (Flew, 2020).

## Extant theorizations of ISM: micro behaviours of capital accumulation meet macro processes of institutionalization

Existing scholarship on ISM comprises a highly diverse, inter-/cross-disciplinary body of literature that resists simple characterization of its underlying theoretical thrust(s) (Lipura & Collins, 2020; Riaño, Van Mol, & Raghuram, 2018; Yang, 2020a). The landscape becomes more complex when one further considers the closely related field of higher education internationalization – an even more established and extensive body of research (Bedenlier, Kondakci, & Zawacki-Richter, 2018). Nevertheless, for the purpose here, a *demand-supply* framework (as previously used by Findlay, 2011, for example) helps one to adumbrate the broadest theoretical contours of existing ISM research.

Demand for ISM arises chiefly from the desires and decisions of individuals – often supported by families and communities behind them – to study in HEIs overseas, with in mind a range of instrumental (e.g., developing skills, advancing career, achieving migration) as well as less/non-instrumental (e.g., self-formation, fun-seeking) objectives (e.g., Baas, 2010; Brooks & Waters, 2011; Waters, Brooks, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). Although governments/states have also played a notable role in giving rise to demand for study-abroad in certain geographical and temporal contexts (see Choudaha, 2017; Xiang & Shen, 2009) (more will be said about this subsequently), the significant expansion of student mobility seen in recent decades has been primarily driven by *individualistically* framed motivations and, importantly, funded through *private* economic means (Choudaha, 2017; Yang, 2020b). Pertaining to this, the most prevalent analysis found in the ISM literature invokes a Bourdieusian theoretical lens (Bourdieu, 1986) to interpret moving abroad for education as a strategy of the more privileged social groups to accumulate prized cultural capital – those associated with the prestigious “West” or the “developed world” – that serves to reproduce class advantage (Baláz & Williams, 2004; King, Findlay, Ahrens, & Dunne, 2011; Waters, 2012; Xiang & Shen, 2009). The fact that (Global) South-to-North and/or East-to-West mobilities dominate ISM flows seems to confirm this analysis (UNESCO, 2013). At the same time, as a number of more recent studies have shown (e.g., Sancho, 2017; Yang, 2018a, 2018b), for youth from less privileged or even somewhat disadvantaged backgrounds who nevertheless are becoming more mobile internationally, ISM may be more appropriately thought of as an attempt to achieve upward social mobility through *entering* the game of trans-border cultural capital accumulation and conversion. In other words, for this latter, less privileged demographic, the logic is to *begin to* accrue capital via mobility in order to break away from social reproduction that structurally disadvantages them. Regardless of the group in question, however, pursuing ISM is prevailingly understood as undertaken by private social actors following individualistic rationales. In short, when viewed as a micro-level social behaviour, ISM often follows what the author has previously termed a “ ‘private-individual’ logic” (Yang, 2020b) of capital accumulation and social reproduction.

When ISM is viewed from the supply side, namely, from the side of the HEIs purveying mobility and the nation-states that inevitably shape, regulate and often promote ISM, a different and more macro explanation becomes compelling. From the extensive literature about universities’ and countries’ rationales for engaging in HE internationalization (Bedenlier et al., 2018; Knight, 2004) emerges a broadly speaking institutionalist theoretical understanding, which Buckner (2019) helpfully encapsulates in her recent work. In essence, as Buckner (2019) argues, drawing on world society theory (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997), HE internationalization has arisen as a “global *model* of status and legitimacy” (Buckner, 2019, p. 318; emphasis added), which is then diffused and embraced by institutional actors (chiefly, universities and governments) worldwide. Specifically, the status and legitimacy of this model, which galvanize a wide array of institutional actors, rests upon the macro conditions of neoliberal globalization and knowledge economy, under which these actors operate. Succinctly put, knowledge economy (or, at least, the *discourse* of it) highlights the value of highly educated/skilled labour and incentivizes institutional actors to attract and compete for “talent” globally (Brown & Tannock, 2009); and one key channel for achieving this is through internationalization

and mobility. Neoliberalization, on the other hand, legitimizes treating HE internationalization (especially the recruitment of fee-paying international students) as an entrepreneurial undertaking that promises lucrative economic benefits for the institutional actors. In short, the increased enthusiasm *for* and activities *in* internationalization by countries and universities, when viewed from the supply-side perspective, can be understood as a macro process of institutionalization in which these organizations engaged with HE globalization following the logics of neoliberalism and knowledge economy.

Obviously, neither a demand-side perspective nor a supply-side explanation can alone satisfactorily account for ISM theoretically. In fact, demand and supply mutually underpin each other: individualistically expressed desires for educational mobility are often fed on neoliberal discourses about the desirability of an international education which are vigorously promoted by institutions selling such an educational experience as a commodity (Buckner, 2019; Collins, Sidhu, Lewis, & Yeoh, 2014; Rhee, 2009); conversely, institutional actors' faith in the internationalization model must also rest on tangible demands from micro social actors (namely, the "consumers" of education) and be vindicated by material benefits flowing from meeting such demands, be it in the form of revenue gains or human capital gains (see Yang, 2020b). Taken together, then, it may be argued that prevailing theorizations of ISM have essentially framed it as arising from the intersections between micro social actors' behaviours of capital accumulation and macro processes of institutionalization pursuant to the hegemonic logics of neoliberal globalization and knowledge economy.

In the next section, a discursive frame of "crisis" is introduced, with a view towards developing an alternative narrative of international student mobility that contrasts with and complements these existing theoretical narratives in ISM research.

### **Rethinking ISM through "crisis": some perspectives from the twentieth century through to the aftermath of GFC 2008**

To rethink international student mobility through a lens of "crisis" requires first some brief notes on the semantics of crisis. While the meaning of the term "crisis" may seem obvious, even commonsensical, critically minded scholars (e.g., Fraser, 2017; Slater, 2015) remind us of what they call the "politics of crisis". There is a politics to crisis in the sense that even if the event or phenomenon described as "crisis" may not be explicitly political in nature, *how* the "crisis" is narratively framed (see e.g., Hay, 1996), understood, and most importantly, seized upon and responded to subsequently by social actors as an occasion and opportunity for potential transformation (Smith & Wiest, 2012) may entail contestations of interests and power – in other words, *politics*. This awareness of the politics of crisis helps to "de-naturalize" events and developments conventionally referred to as "crises", bringing to the fore the underlying agendas possibly pursued by different socio-political actors who respond to and leverage the said "crises". In doing so, such a perspective enhances our understanding of the effects of "crisis" on particular social fields and practices, including education. In the account below, this applies to the various cases of crisis-ISM entanglement in history, but particularly with respect to the more recent examples of China and Singapore, in which "crisis" could be seen as discursively mobilized to frame and justify specific state policies and programmes.

In what follows, my writing draws on some key ISM developments over the twentieth century through to the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008. However, this account remains highly selective and cursory as my purpose here is mainly illustrative, whereas a more thorough effort will have to be left to future research. It is also worth noting that, although I introduce subsections pertaining respectively to crises of *geopolitics*, *economy* and *human capital (re)production*, this categorization is partly for reasons of organizational expediency since in reality crises are often multi-faceted.

## **Geopolitical crises and ISM**

In the first half of the twentieth century, one of the better-known instances of East-to-West student mobility born out of geopolitical crisis situations was the flow of students from China to the United States (US) that lasted from the final decades of the imperial Qing dynasty (which ended in 1911) to 1920s (Q. E. Wang, 1994; W. Ye, 2001). In a last ditch effort (though ultimately futile) to halt its rapid descent into an all-round existential crisis, the Qing government sent a modest number of students (one hundred or so) to America in 1870s-80s to learn from the advanced West, in the name of a “Self-Strengthening Movement” (Ye, 2001). Later, following the Boxer Incident of 1900 – one of the last major political and diplomatic crises to confront and humiliate the moribund Qing regime – the indemnity funds paid by the regime to the US were subsequently channelled into setting up the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program in 1908 to sponsor Chinese students to study in American universities. Thousands of Chinese students benefited under this Program, among whom later emerged some of the most influential public intellectuals, educators, and scientists who spear-headed China’s tumultuous transition to modernity. For this reason, historian Weili Ye (2001) regarded the Boxer Indemnity student mobility to be “arguably the most consequential and successful in the entire foreign-study movement of twentieth-century China” (p. 10). It is crucial to point out, however, the Americans’ remission of the Boxer Indemnity funds in the form of scholarships for the Chinese was hardly altruistic; instead, as has been argued by various scholars (Michael, 1972; Q. E. Wang, 1994; W. Ye, 2001), it was to be “understood in the context of contemporary international *geopolitics*” (Ye, 2001, p. 11; emphasis added) whereby the Americans sought explicitly to promote their influence and power over China through shaping elite members of the Chinese society by means of an American education.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the overriding geopolitical situation that shaped ISM was the Cold War, fought as much in terms of ideology/value/knowledge as in geo-strategic terms. As Baas (2019) usefully noted: “[a]fter the Second World War, the idea of who would be able to study abroad changed” (p. 225), with the geopolitical concern over the “threat” of Communism coming to underscore Western capitalist countries’ approach towards educating foreign students. Baas further observes:

Various scholarship opportunities were subsequently opened up to sponsor students from newly independent countries. The idea that students would return home after completing their studies [in the capitalist West] so that they could assist in facilitating socio-economic change in their respective nations, as well as spread the positive message of capitalism, was crucial to this. (p. 225)

Epitomizing this in the South and Southeast Asia region was the socioeconomic development programme Colombo Plan (1950), under which “an estimated 40,000 students came from across the region to live and study in Australia from the early 1950s” (Byrne, 2016, p. 114). In addition, throughout the Cold War era, the United States as the leading nation of the capitalist world continued to attract talented students from the world over through its well-funded higher education institutions (Bevis & Lucas, 2007; O’Mara, 2012), advancing what would in today’s language be termed “soft power”. On the other side of the geopolitical and ideological gulf a similar situation prevailed: to illustrate, over the 1950s, the newly founded communist People’s Republic of China sent significant numbers of students (in excess of 16,000) to study in Soviet Russia, as part of the technology/knowledge transfer schemes under the geo-strategic alliance between both communist regimes (Zhang, Zhang, & Yao, 2006). Subsequently, as the Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, these student flows also dried up.

Even with the Cold War drawing to a close in the late 1980s, crises of a geopolitical nature continued to shape ISM in remarkable ways in a post-Cold War world. For example, upon the 1989 Tiananmen student protest movement in China ending in a violent crackdown, the US granted special immigration privileges to Chinese nationals. Specifically, the Chinese Student Protection Act

(CSPA) passed in 1992 eventually led to the granting of permanent residency (the coveted “green cards”) to 53,000 Chinese – many of whom students and scholars whose settlement in America would otherwise have been more difficult (Orrenius, Zavodny, & Kerr, 2012).

In the new millennium, the first major geopolitical event to have had a notable impact on ISM was the 9/11 incident. The terrorist attacks led to a general securitization of migration/mobility across many Western countries, thus dampening the growth of West-bound ISM. To illustrate, the growth of international student enrolment in America slowed to a relatively modest 11% over the 1999–2006 period (Choudaha, 2018). It is worth emphasizing, however, that the effect of the 9/11-induced securitization on ISM was ultimately limited and temporary; in fact, ISM growth gathered pace again after 2008, as shall be discussed in the next section.

Over the most recent several years, shadows of geopolitics began to loom large over ISM again. For instance, the 2016 UK “Brexit” referendum and the European migrant/refugee crisis heightened in Europe a climate less welcoming to those labelled “outsiders”, including international students. In the US, former President Donald Trump’s foreign policies had ratcheted up geopolitical tensions with China, a key player in global ISM landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as having materially exacerbated these tensions, arguably to a crisis level. These more recent geopolitical crises and their implications for ISM will be considered later. The next section turns to look at how ISM has been bound up with economic crises.

### ***Economic crises and ISM***

To illustrate the connection between economic crises and international student mobility does not require one to quest as far back into history: the relatively recent Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008 with its negative impact on higher education in the developed West (Eggins & West, 2010) provides an apt case. In the United States – the epicentre of the GFC – this connection appeared the most pronounced. Macrander’s (2017) study, using statistical analysis, found “a significant, inverse relationship, beginning primarily in 2008, between declining educational appropriations and the growing influx of international students to the U.S”. (p. 2). Indeed, the number of international students in the US jumped by as much as 45% between 2008/09 and 2014/15 (ibid.). The financial contributions to the US economy made by fee-paying international students, many of whom from China and India (both were fast-developing countries less affected by the GFC), went up from \$17.8 billion in 2008 to \$27 billion by the 2013–2014 school year (ibid.), and to a further \$39.4 billion in 2016 (iie.org, 2018). For many US colleges and universities struggling with loss of public funding and flagging domestic student participation in the aftermath of the GFC, international students were the obvious “cash cows” (Cantwell, 2015) and recruiting more of them became “a survival strategy” (Macrander, 2017, p. 3). For this reason, Macrander (2017) went as far as to characterize ISM as “[a]n international solution to a national crisis” (p. 1) in the post-GFC American context.

Similar situations were found elsewhere in the developed Anglophone world: in the UK, for instance, higher education also became increasingly dependent on revenues generated from fee-paying non-EU international students (Marginson, 2018). Countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada all derived greater economic resources from ISM – particularly those originating from China – in the years after the GFC (see Yang, 2020b).

While the above analysis shows that economic crisis prompted certain countries (and HEIs within them) to ramp up ISM supply as a strategic response, other scholars have asked how economic crisis as a background factor might affect youth’s intentions to study and work abroad. Cairns’s (e.g., Cairns, 2014, 2015, 2017) work, for instance, explored this question in economic crisis-stricken European countries such as Ireland and Portugal; his findings however are not clear-cut, suggesting more complicated relations between economic crisis and student mobility than might be apparent at first glance. For example, while economic crisis and the consequent lack of employment

opportunities in the domestic labour market might seem logically to encourage mobility intentions, the reverse could also be true: crisis might indeed weaken the ability and/or desire of young people to seek education and work abroad (Cairns, 2015).

### ***Crises in human capital (re)production and ISM***

The third and final category of crisis that has been closely bound up with developments in international student mobility pertains to the (re)production of “human capital” from the view point of nation states. Since human capital is usually measured in terms of the amount of education/training received (Becker, 1994), state-sponsored ISM to foreign countries with more advanced education and technology has been a favoured method used by laggard countries that perceive there to be a crisis in their own (re)production of national human capital. (In this sense, both the late Qing dynasty’s dispatch of students to America and the PRC’s sending of students to Soviet Russia in 1950s could also be considered as state responses to perceived human capital deficits; however, because the *geopolitical* context was clearly primary in both cases, they were categorized so accordingly).

In Asia, China and Singapore are two countries that have in recent past explicitly used ISM to address their respective, *perceived* crises in human capital (re)production. Recalling the earlier discussion about politics of crisis, it is important that “crises” are not treated simplistically as ontologically self-evident, but instead understood as discursively constructed framing devices used to justify certain policy discourses and programmes adopted by the two countries in relation to ISM. For China, these programmes centred around *outbound* ISM, whereas for Singapore it was mainly *inbound* ISM in question.

With China, as the country emerged at the end of 1970s from several disastrous decades of radical socialism, the government recognized a severe crisis in terms of the low “quality” (*suzhi*) of the Chinese population as a major obstacle to the country’s modernization (Jacka, 2009). In a bid to address this human capital deficit (other measures included the controversial birth control policy), the Chinese government in the 1980s began to sponsor politically trusted and professionally qualified personnel to pursue postgraduate studies abroad and required them to return afterwards to serve in state bureaucracy and academia (Hansen & Thøgersen, 2015; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Gradually, as more Chinese went overseas for studies in the following decades with an increasing proportion of them not under state sponsorship, the perceived crisis evolved into one of “brain drain”, and accordingly the focus of the Chinese state’s intervention shifted to attracting back highly educated Chinese through a variety of incentive schemes for returnees (H. Wang, 2004; Xiang, 2011). Evidence suggests that these efforts at tapping ISM return flows have not been very successful (Yang, 2020b; Zweig & Wang, 2013). Nevertheless, it is clear that outbound ISM from China in the past several decades has been subject to state discourses and policy interventions in relation to the (re) production of national human capital.

In the case of Singapore – a small city-state for which a discourse of vulnerability is central to national identity due to historical reasons (Heng, 2013) – falling population fertility rates in the 1980s and an imperative to stay competitive in the emerging global knowledge economy culminated in a sense of crisis about the adequacy of the country’s human capital base (Quah, 1984). In response, alongside adopting an immigration policy highly favourable to skilled immigrants (Yang, Yang, & Zhan, 2017), the Singapore government also instituted in the 1990s a number of merit-based scholarship schemes that recruited in the ensuing decades significant numbers of pre-tertiary students (“scholars”) from China, ASEAN countries, and India (Yang, 2016). Scholarship programmes targeting PRC students were particularly systematic and extensive (Yang, 2014a, 2014b), having brought into Singapore education system as many as 15,000 Chinese students based on the author’s estimates in 2016 (Yang, 2016). Furthermore, key features of the two tertiary-level PRC scholarships (“SM2” and “SM3”) clearly demonstrate an underlying intention to address perceived human capital needs of Singapore: scholarship recipients were covered for all tuition cost plus stipend, but must only study science/engineering related disciplines at university, and are legally “bonded” to work in



Singapore for six years after graduation. Meanwhile, scholars' settlement in Singapore is made easy, and for a number of years, these scholars were even issued invitations by the authorities to apply for permanent residency. Recruiting Chinese students based on academic merit not only served to address perceived human capital crisis facing Singapore in an era of knowledge economy and low fertility; at a more fundamental level, the importation of ethnically Chinese subjects was also meant to help uphold the reproduction of Singapore population in accordance with existing ethnic composition (Yeoh & Lin, 2013). Last, it is worth noting that although Singapore has mainly used *inbound* state-sponsored ISM programmes to address its perceived crisis in human capital reproduction; when it comes to (re)producing elite talent destined for highest leadership roles in public service, the Singapore state has had a strong and ongoing tradition of sponsoring Singaporean students on outbound educational mobilities to top academic institutions in Anglophone countries (Barr & Skrbis, 2008; R. Ye & Nylander, 2015).

### **ISM at the juncture of pandemic and global uncertainties**

What the preceding section has sought to demonstrate – even if in a selective and cursory manner – is how in certain social contexts and episodes of recent history, international student mobility has been intimately bound up with crises of various sorts, often powerfully shaped by them or instrumentalized by actors as responses to those crises. In most of these instances of crisis-ISM dialectic, crises catalysed ISM development or growths; in other words, crises have thus far often presented opportunities to ISM. However, the present moment of crisis stemming from COVID-19 looks far less sanguine for ISM, with the immediate implications overwhelmingly negative. This last section of the paper first examines these immediate challenges, and then briefly considers the broader global uncertainties lying ahead for ISM.

#### **COVID-19 and ISM's immediate crises**

The most immediate crises confronting ISM due to COVID-19 are often logistical in nature, resulting from the wide-spread campus closures, travel restrictions, and border control measures imposed in most countries in some forms or other. For instance, in the early phase of the pandemic when China was the epicentre, Australia banned direct travel from China in early February 2020. This sudden suspension of inflows of Chinese students threatened many Australian HEIs that were highly reliant on Chinese student fees with a revenue crisis, and indeed prompted some institutions to offer, not without some irony, financial subsidies to incentivize Chinese students to transit via third countries in order to circumvent the travel ban and enter Australia to begin or resume studies (Haugen & Lehmann, 2020). For the many international students already involved in various forms of educational mobility when COVID-19 hit, the pandemic often meant premature terminations or hurried departures that were both logistically and psychologically challenging<sup>1</sup>; worse still, for some others it meant *forced immobility* (Mulvey, 2020). For all key parties involved in ISM – students, universities, sending and hosting country authorities – the pandemic made crisis management urgently necessary for a time (Rumbley, 2020).

Another direct consequence of the pandemic has been prospective students' reassessment of the safety and desirability of study-abroad, triggered in particular by concerns over health and safety, rising racism/xenophobia, and overall expectations about living in foreign countries. In reality, these factors often worked in interwoven and reinforcing manners to shape the perceptions and attitudes of potential students (and that of their families and communities), likely with significant implications on ISM demand, at least in the near term. In terms of health and safety considerations, for example, the US authorities' initially problematic handling of the pandemic is said to have caused serious concerns among some international students, damaging the appeal of studying in the country (Berger, 2020). Similarly, in the UK, a study found that the controversial "herd immunity" strategy initially pursued by the government caused significant worries among prospective students (and

their parents) from China (Parr, 2020) – UK's largest source of fee-paying foreign students.<sup>2</sup> In light of these developments, it is possible that countries perceived to have handled the pandemic better (such as New Zealand and Singapore) would enjoy increased appeal among international students as a result; paradoxically, however, these countries may also take a more cautious approach towards admitting foreign students.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond concerns with health *per se*, the pandemic has triggered a sharp rise in racism/xenophobia across various Western host countries, as a flurry of media reports have documented (sbs.com.au, 2020; straitstimes.com, 2020; timeshighereducation.com, 2020). Given that the majority of international students hail from the developing world, particularly Asia, perceptions of certain countries as racist/xenophobic and thus unwelcoming and unsafe, will likely cause them to think twice about these destinations. Prospective international students may not merely fear everyday racism/xenophobia; in some cases, such as the US under the former Trump administration, they might perceive hostility towards international students to be an official policy. Trump's belligerent rhetoric about COVID-19 as a "Chinese virus", and the administration's plan – though short-lived – to revoke international students' visas if they took classes entirely online (nytimes.com, 2020), were dramatic acts that prompted prospective international students to re-evaluate their plans to study in the US. A recent survey found that new international student enrolment (including online learning) in the US for autumn 2020 dropped by 43% compared to the previous year (Baer & Martel, 2020).

Suffice it to say, ISM's immediate crises have been abrupt and severe: logistical and administrative obstacles to travelling, coupled with reassessment of risks and benefit-cost calculations about study-abroad, are likely to result in a sharp drop in ISM demand over the near term, possibly reshuffling worldwide ISM flows in the aftermath. While these immediate crises may be thought of optimistically as temporary, when the current crisis is set against a backdrop of larger persisting global trends, there are reasons to view the future of ISM as highly uncertain, as discussed next.

### **Global uncertainties: geopolitics, social compact, existential threats**

To think about broader global trends that may spell uncertainty for the future of ISM, the case of China and US – respectively the world's largest sending and receiving country of international students – is again an apt place to start. In September 2020, US authorities revoked the visas of some 1,000 Chinese students and researchers, citing national security risk. This extraordinary act, following several years of rapidly deteriorating US-China relations since former President Trump came to power, shows how geopolitics is again emerging as a major destabilizing factor for ISM. Over the past several decades, China has been the single most important driving force behind the worldwide rise of ISM (Yang, 2020b). Now, as the Sino-US trade war evolved into more broad-based distrust and antagonism between China and many developed Western democracies, Altbach (2020) warned that the West's dependence on China for the lucrative international student enrolment might turn into a "coming 'China crisis'". Admittedly, the landscape of ISM goes beyond the China-US/West sphere; yet, in a world where geopolitical tensions between major powers appear to be on the rise, the general outlook for educational mobility and exchange cannot but look increasingly uncertain. What the transition to Joe Biden administration in US might mean for all these questions remain to be seen; however, the tense relationship between China and the West has not seen significant improvement as at the time of writing.

Beneath geopolitical trends often are deeper issues relating to the breakdown or crisis in socio-political compacts. This is widely regarded the case in respect to the election of Trump to the 45th US presidency and the UK's referendum to leave the European Union ("Brexit") in 2016. Both events have been interpreted as reflecting a trend in the developed West of populist backlash against decades of neoliberal globalization that has exacerbated inequalities and benefited cosmopolitan, socially and geographically mobile elites at the expense of the masses (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). With HE internationalization and student mobility being emblematic of

precisely these neoliberal logics of globalization (as discussed earlier), scholars have raised well justified concerns over the negative impact of rising populism and right-wing movements for ISM in these two top ISM destination countries (Bartram, 2018; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). More broadly, media scholar Flew (2020) argues that what the former Trump presidency and Brexit signalled is possibly the arrival of a “post-globalization” era, in which there is to be a return and reassertion of the *national* in world relations. If such predictions come to pass, international collaborations and sharing of resources (particularly knowledge), which are key underlying rationales of ISM, will be viewed with greater suspicion.

Last, what overclouds the future of ISM at the far horizon are economic limits and ecological boundaries that confront humanity as a whole in an existential sense. While this is not the place to elaborate on these existential uncertainties, the longer-term implications for ISM can be briefly sketched. Decades of rise in ISM has been fuelled primarily by rapidly rising (middle-class) incomes in developing countries, particularly that of China. However, with the world economy taking a heavy hit from the COVID-19 pandemic, amidst a general slowdown of economic growth across the world, at an aggregate level the availability of economic resources to sustain ISM growth seems doubtful. Moreover, with a growing planetary consciousness about the ecological unsustainability of a world of hyper-globalization and hypermobility fuelled largely still on carbon-based energy sources, scholars of international HE have also begun to question seriously the model of internationalization based on physical/corporeal mobility, calling it an “unnecessary” and “antiquated approach” (White & Lee, 2020). Advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) and ICT-based pedagogical innovations have galvanized discussions about virtual models of educational mobility and internationalization (Mittelmeier, Rienties, Gunter, & Raghuram, 2020) that may increasingly replace traditional ISM. No doubt, these non-physical models of mobility and internationalization have received an enormous impetus during COVID-19.

To conclude, it seems clear that the COVID-19 pandemic not only plunged ISM into acute short-term crises, it has also added notable uncertainties to its future development through intersecting with and, at times, reinforcing certain longer-term global trends. In thus musing about what lies ahead for ISM, a speculative tone has been hard to avoid in some of the above discussions, but the paper’s aim is not to “crystal ball-gaze” the future of ISM. Instead, in using “crisis” as a discursive and analytical trope, the paper has attempted an alternative narrative understanding of ISM that differs from, perhaps enriches, the supply-demand framework that implicitly undergirds much of the extant theorizations of ISM. In narrating ISM’s various entanglements with crises – past, present, and future – it is also hoped that discussions in this paper would open up further conversations about new possibilities and alternative futures for ISM.

## Notes

1. For some real stories told by mobile students affected by the pandemic, see <https://covidism.wordpress.com/ism-voices/>
2. Surprisingly, when data became available, it turns out applications for UK undergraduate places from Chinese students in fact surged by more than 23% in the 2020 admission round (thetimes.co.uk, 2020). This goes to show the fluidity and unpredictability of ISM in the current environment.
3. The author’s observations based at a tertiary institution in Singapore serves to illustrate: the government has been cautious in granting entry visas, causing delays to international student arrivals.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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