Chapter 1

International Student Mobility: Examining Trends and Tensions

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ABSTRACT

Student mobility has increasingly become a key issue of policy and practice in higher education. This chapter presents a set of critical views about international student mobility globally, setting the context for emerging voices and critical lenses. The authors argue that educators should look into the bigger picture of mobility to understand its complex and multifaceted issues which go beyond counting enrollment numbers. Where do students go to study and why? Where do they come from and who was able to leave home? What obstacles do students face and how do they overcome them? There are some of the central questions of student mobility discourse. In this backdrop, the authors argue that students must be treated fairly by the simple logic of reciprocity: international students are “international” in the host countries in the same way as study abroad students will be “international” by default in the receiving countries. The only question is whether we are ready to accept a humane world where mobile students are valued as part of a global community and for global good, rather than just viewed in terms of mercenary drives of the market.

The wind caught him and carried him higher. “Do not be afraid,” the voice [of the Frog from the field below] called to him. “Hang on to the wind and trust!” . . . . and the higher he went the clearer [his newly gained sight] became. . . . “You have a new name,” called the Frog. “You are Eagle!” (Story of the Jumping Mouse, Steptoe, 2010).

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INTRODUCTION

Humans have always moved across borders—physical, political, socioeconomic, cultural, and others—and their movement has been amplified by advancements in the means of travel and communication. We move for survival, for opportunity, and for learning. We move away from where we are born and live, and we move back or further away, depending on push and pull factors that discourses about mobility have explored. Significantly, the only mobility that gets talked about is “international,” reflecting the dominance of national-istic framing in the discourse about human mobility. That framing has further limited the discourse about human mobility in general and international student mobility in particular within narratives and assumptions about language, culture, and economic prowess—exposing the faultline in the nationalized views about those other phenomena. Within the nationalistic framing of international student mobility, then, a Sri Lankan student is assumed to seek educational opportunity in the United States instead of India and for particular reasons, regardless of reality. There may be more mobility between the two neighboring countries—not just by numbers but by type, speed, reasons, and complexity—but they may all be rendered invisible by dominant interest and assumptions and discourses in the scholarship. So, like the Jumping Mouse in the Native American fable that we cited above, one has to learn to look beyond dominant narratives, rise above assumptions, look at the big picture, and tell stories from details that one gathers from clearer or closer views of reality. Like the Mouse, who symbolically turns into an Eagle in the story, scholars must acquire new perspectives and clarity in their understanding by venturing beyond the historical and geo-national limits of established disciplines and discourses.

In recent years, the mobility of international student has been viewed as one of the indicators of campus diversity, internationalization, and a prime source to boost the revenue of the institution of higher education in major destinations. This view of local interest has dominated the conversation about global mobility. Today, over five million students cross national borders for their higher education and that crossing is the dominant basis of discourse about mobility. This mobility trend of international students is of interest to universities, educators, business leaders, and the government not so much because it embodies greater flow and advancement of ideas, exchange of experience, and achievement of common interests across borders but because it offers monetary benefit and serves national interests. Globally ranked universities do aspire to provide meaningful international experiences for their domestic students; their leaders are also committed to the mission of global engagement and are willing to persevere in the face of challenges brought about by the current rise in anti-immigration rhetoric (Marklein, 2017). And yet, nation-based framing of the discourse—which further shapes perspectives about language, culture, politics, economics, and other terms of analysis—continues to make some questions seem less significant than others, some findings less meaningful, some realities less visible. This chapter presents a set of critical views about international student mobility globally, setting the context for emerging voices and critical lenses. Where do students go to study and why? Where do they come from and who was able to leave home? What obstacles do students face and how do they overcome them? These questions should not just be answered by using whatever perspectives are dominant in the places where students arrive, whatever theories are popular among those who do the studying. What do we miss from where we look at things? How could we add other perspectives we haven’t adopted yet, as well as other issues we haven’t discussed and other questions we haven’t asked?