

32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education  
7-10 November, Louisville, Kentucky

Symposium, 10 November:

'Reconceptualizing international students: exploring identities and roles from alternative perspectives'

## **Yes Virginia, these are human agents and they have histories: ways of rethinking the research construction of 'international students'**

*[presentation version]*

Simon Marginson \*

Centre for the Study of Higher Education  
University of Melbourne, Australia  
s.marginson@unimelb.edu.au

---

**Preface: Comparative Education can be fun.** As this is the opening session of the International Forum, with your indulgence I will open with a short reflection on the work of international comparison in our field. A warning: your sense of irony will be tested.

**[2]** International comparison can be puzzling. National education systems, even individual institutions, are sociologically complex with distinct histories, economies, languages, cultures, programs, qualification structures, professional traditions, categories, terms.

**[3]** So, sometimes the data are not *quite* as clear as we would like. Data not collected on the basis of common definitions and categories

---

\* Simon Marginson is a Professor of Higher Education in the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne, Australia. He is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences Australia and the Society for Research into Higher Education (UK), and board member of *Higher Education*, *Higher Education Policy*, *Higher Education Quarterly*, *Journal of Education and Work* and *Thesis Eleven*.

*e-mail address:* s.marginson@unimelb.edu.au

*fax:* 613-83447576

*telephone:* 613-83448060

*postal address:* Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010 Australia

across all sites are difficult or impossible to standardize. But a mass of non standardized data tells us nothing comparative.

**[4]** In fact the process of comparison can be *very* puzzling. It can be frustrating. It can make you angry! There are real methodological dilemmas here. The process of comparison is vectored by both 'sameness' and 'difference'. 'Sameness' and 'difference' are both necessary to comparison. If the process of comparison veers too far towards one or the other something is lost. But the use of each of 'sameness' and 'difference' in comparison tends to undermine the other. I told my parents about this but they wouldn't listen!

**[5]** For example, when we *standardize* the data on education from diverse national systems, each with its own distinctive character, to enable common comparisons to be made – in other words, when we use social science to emphasize *sameness* –

**[6]** the distinctive features of each national education system might become a little downplayed

**[7]** so the differing contexts of each nation's performance are lost. The false impression is created that every education system is capable of performing, in much the same way and even to the same extent, to the illusory 'common standard' created by our methodology. With the specific features of each national system obscured in the drive for comparative 'sameness', data crucial to understanding educational outcomes in particular countries can 'fall through the cracks'

**[8]** and, being no longer at the surface of our understanding and accessible to 'common sense' observation...

**[9]** can escape the attention of even the most sharp-sighted policy makers

**[10]** whose commitment to improving the education system cannot be questioned.

**[11]** On the other hand, when the *differences* between each national education system are emphasized, we can underestimate the

elements national systems have in common. When every case is treated as unique, comparison then becomes impossible.

[12] Yet when trying to *combine* comparison *and* the recognition of difference, bringing in too many heterogeneous elements into the comparison at once, so that it is grounded in multiple logics not a mathematically unitary logic, we can get into a complete tangle!

[13] Even so, carefully handled, international comparisons *can* help us to see our own educational situation more clearly. On some days very clearly!

[14] Comparative data help alert modern scholars to keep up with the latest developments,

[15] and they help governments around the world to craft new policies - from time to time following good ideas developed in other education systems, for example United States higher education, or the ideas of the New Public Management - though always only after measured, careful consideration, and after judiciously adapting those ideas to better suit local circumstances and needs

[16] This leads to investment in education infrastructure designed on the basis of world's best practice

[17] and innovative learning programs of lasting value. And above all – and surely this is the clinching argument for the value of the exercise –

[18] international comparisons can be fun!

**Macro-data on cross-border students.** I'll turn now to the main business of the symposium. [19] Macro-data on worldwide cross-border student flows are increasingly accessible. In addition to the annual compilation by the OECD this year there were useful summaries by Bashir for the World Bank and by the UK Observatory for Borderless Education. [20] These papers show us that the export 'market' in cross-border tertiary education (or 'econ-system' as some prefer to describe it) is becoming increasingly plural, especially in first degrees. As well being as the largest importer, China is also a major

exporter of higher education, especially to Korea and Japan. Note also the growing importance of Singapore and Malaysia with possibly the Gulf States to follow. There continues to be increasing cross-border student movement within the EU which accounts for a quarter of all worldwide student traffic. **[21]** Cross-border mobility is no longer as overwhelmingly dominated by the movement of students from EFL countries to the English-speaking zone, and the Asia-Pacific is becoming ever more important. Many nations in that region have developed a two-way pattern of student flows. The insular English language systems, with their one-way cross-border student movement in to the country, and their unchanging local students and curricula, are not the norm.

**[22]** At the same time, the English speaking continue to be the principal financial beneficiaries of the trade side of cross-border student movement, and the United States continues to be overwhelmingly dominant in cross-border doctoral education. In the UK, Australia and New Zealand, though not the USA, **[23]** there has been tremendous growth in the number of cross-border students at first degree and Masters level during in the last decade. **[24]** In these countries there is now a major financial dependence on cross-border students as a revenue source, and it functions in the framework of a commercial market regulated by consumer protection laws.

**[25]** Well, a cash cow is all very well, it might seem a fine thing when it's peacefully chomping away there in the field, to the staccato beeps of ATMs and bank deposit machines in the background. **[26]** But what happens if it grows horns and develops a proactive personality of its own? Like the characterization of cross-border education as an aggregated 'market' or set of markets, macro analysis, which is often deployed to service market imaginings, tends to eliminate the individuality and agency of cross-border students, with their differing identities, histories and fast changing trajectories. It models cross-border students as a function of abstract demand and supply and push-pull forces rather than projects of self-making that they control.

**[27] Data from psychology.** Most studies of individual cross-border students are drawn from psychology and focused on student feelings of satisfaction (again reflecting marketing objectives) or psychological adjustment to the norms of the host culture and its academic

requirements. These studies mostly use methods such as surveys which preset the potential data to be found within the cultural assumptions of the host country, largely eliminating the distinctive cross-border student voices in advance. As the outline of this symposium notes, 'much of this scholarship operates within a social integration paradigm and places the burden to adjust on students, largely ignoring structures of power and asymmetry. Even though this literature focuses on individual experiences, it too has agency-stripping tendencies. International students are seen as entities that must adapt to a new environment rather than agents capable of influence and negotiating complex structures.' Given the dominance of the psychological paradigm at the level of academic mission, it is not surprising that studies show persistently that pedagogies and curricula in the English-speaking nations have changed little despite the high volume of cross-border students in some countries; and that the level of deeper mixing between local and cross-border students is persistently low and disappoints both institutional personnel and more so, the cross-border students themselves. Local students and local faculty are under no pressure to adjust to cross-border students. Rather a virtue is made of treating them 'like us', which is to say they should become 'like us' as soon as possible.

Further, in breaking down the original elements of cross-border student identity so as to prepare the student subjects, methodologically speaking, as blank sheets on which to inscribe the stages of the adjustment progression, psychology also tends to eliminate an understanding not only of students backgrounds but of the larger field of cross-border education and its context. Some cross-cultural psychology comes closer to the cross-border student experience, especially when it uses interviews.

**[28] Preferred approaches.** In the face of the lacuna regarding agency, where do we go from here? Analytically speaking, we need to keep both balls in the air, structure and agency, while managing cultural specificity and cultural hegemony at the same time. The alternative course of action, collapsing the structure/agency distinction altogether, constitutes an illusory theoretical triumph because such approaches tend to either read the whole of agency in terms of structure (ultra-determinism) or the whole of structure in terms of agency (ultra-voluntarism). And while the possibilities are

never fully open and we can trace main lines of force, affect and differentiation, the possibilities are also ontologically open to some degree. Cross-border students are shaped by the context in which mobility occurs but also they develop themselves in unexpected ways. They each undergo a profound personal transformation, one that can take many different possible courses.

**[29]** The recent program of 200 international student interviews conducted by a combined Monash University and University of Melbourne group has unearthed significant data on identity and self-transformation, though it set out to study the social and economic security of the students. This points to the value of semi-structured interviews and the collection of narratives, methods that allow us to trap a complex data set in which the students' own voices emerge and the agency factor becomes part-shaping of the means of interpretation, for example by generating new content headings. The Monash/Melbourne interviews were all carried out by an international student who was herself from an EFL background, which helped in establishing empathy and often also trust. In the case of many cross-border students, there is also much to be gained by interviews in the home country language.

What stands out in the Monash/Melbourne data is the fast-changing, even volatile character of identity as experienced by many of the students; the relative openness of identity; and its multiple sources and its multiple character: for example many students seem to hold elements of themselves as a 'constant' person, for example in relation to family back home, while changing themselves or being changed significantly in other respects. Further, far from adjusting more or less unconsciously to local conditions and requirements, many students consciously determine which elements of themselves they will 'adjust' (such as language use and selective social values) and which prior elements of themselves that they retain. They are often quite remarkably articulate on the reflexive construction of the self. These data allow us to think further about the respective utility of notions of multiplicity and hybridity in studying identity in globally mobile populations; and in general point to the ontological openness of the global, compared to the national and local dimensions.

There are a range of further possibilities for research in the traditions of qualitative sociology and social and cultural theory, informed also by political economy, that is focused on the agency, changing identities and life stories of cross-border students. One is a closer focus on the *construction and self-production of agency and personal trajectory*, comparing students from different cultural backgrounds while taking account also of the particular social, economic, intellectual and institutional contexts they have experienced.

Second, global flows are associated with new kinds of locality and approaches to locality. The study of cross-border student agency opens the issue of the kinds of locality – the communities and ways of living – that international students create in the country of study.

**[30]** A third possibility is to study the educational backgrounds of cross-border students much more closely, again taking into account national variation, and cultural-linguistic variation. Institutions focus much effort on piloting domestic students through the transition from school to higher education. They liaise with schools and they know their programs and the academic requirements that these generated. By contrast, we do not imagine, research, teach or administer international education as a process of transition; even though the transition problems faced by cross-border students are far far greater than those faced by domestic students, even leaving aside the academic problems that many face in operating in the English language. Little effort or no effort is made in English-language countries to study the teaching methods, teacher-student relations, preferred norms of learning and actual curricula that cross-border students experienced in the home country. Unthinking prejudices about ‘Asian learners’ are rife in institutions. We trash their whole prior educational experience by telling them to forget it and start all over. Yet it is this prior learning experience that has brought them to the starting gate in a foreign country. If we learned more about their experiences in home country secondary and tertiary education we would be better placed not only to assist with the transition but to develop more hybrid curricula in the country of cross-border education, drawing on more than one educational tradition. We might develop a capacity to challenge domestic students to internationalise, and achieve a deeper level of cross-cultural mixing. **[31]**