

Disciplinary Guide:

Migration Studies

**Written by
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**Research with
International Students**

About the author



Thomas Brotherhood is currently an Assistant Professor at the Rikkyo University, College of Business, and will join the Kyoto University Graduate School of Education as a lecturer in September 2024. His research concerns the relationship between internationalisation of higher education and international migration, and he places a particular emphasis on the

experiences of mobile actors including international students, foreign-born faculty, and their dependents. His ongoing funded research project (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science) is an empirical exploration of universities' diverse roles as "migration intermediaries." This project is part of a broader research agenda which seeks to understand and emphasize higher education's position at the fulcrum of contemporary migration flows.

About this series

Research with international students is an interdisciplinary field and there are a wide range of research disciplines which can add to our thinking about this subject. This series brings together global experts to present different research disciplines and their application to this research topic with the aim of encouraging more interdisciplinary thinking.

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Introduction

This short piece seeks to introduce and advocate for deeper engagement between higher education and migration studies. The intersection between migration studies and research with international students, in particular, seems self-evident. International students, by most definitions, cross national borders as part of their educational journey and necessarily engage with the migration infrastructures of home, host, and intermediary countries. Having said that, if you are reading this you are likely to be keenly aware of the tensions and inconsistencies that exist in the treatment of international students within regulatory and legal frameworks, higher education institutions and society at large, to say nothing of international students' reciprocal influence on each. Efforts are ongoing to tease out these tensions within higher education studies, sometimes supported by the adoption of influential ideas from migration studies, but there is untapped potential here. Scholars in both fields may benefit from drawing on the full breadth of theoretical and methodological tools that each offer when seeking to understand international student mobility and migration, but also in expanding our understanding of universities' diverse roles within international migration.

A brief overview of migration studies

Migration is a fundamental feature of human existence which has increasingly been studied by scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds since the turn of the 20th century. Migration studies began to coalesce as a distinct field post-WW2 before accelerating in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Scholten, 2022). This was partly motivated by a recognition that dedicated study and the creation of bespoke theoretical resources would be required to advance our understanding of human migration. Indeed, in 1993, Massey and colleagues noted the lack of a “single coherent theory” that had been offered to help understand the “complex, multifaceted nature” of migration flows (Massey et al., 1993). They argued that existing theories of migration sought only to understand the factors that would *either* catalyse *or* perpetuate migration flows, at the expense of concerted efforts to develop more inclusive theories that could be applied across entire migration journeys. The search for such inclusive theories continues to be a driver of the field today.

The Age of Migration (De Haas et al., 2020) explains that this situation reflects the different disciplinary priorities of scholars within the “plural field” of migration studies (Scholten, 2022). The authors distinguish between broad “functionalist” and “historical-structural” approaches as distinct paradigms, each borrowing implicit ontological assumptions about human agency and its role in migration flows from the (broadly defined) parent disciplines of economics and sociology, respectively. I recommend reading *The Age of Migration* for a more detailed explanation but, in the simplest of terms, scholars drawing on the functionalist tradition typically apply the laws of neoclassical economics and human capital theory to explain global migration flows, and have advanced several influential models such as push-pull theory. Conversely, the historical-structural paradigm is built on a foundation of neo-Marxist theory that foregrounds structural inequalities and persistent power imbalances as key determinants of migration. Both approaches have enduring appeal but struggle to explain real-world migration flows (De Haas et al., 2020).

Bakewell (2010) argues that the limits of these theories is located in their extreme understandings of structure-agency relations. On the one hand, functionalism is criticised for a “striking absence of agency and power” and emphasis on individualism (Bakewell et al., 2012, p. 420). On the other hand, the historical-structural approach emphasises structural factors to the extent that it scholars overlook the importance of migrant agency (De Haas et al., 2020). In recognition of this polarization, Bakewell foregrounds the rich middle ground of “subjectivist” or “integrative” approaches that are sensitive to the powerful influence of structure-agency interactions in both the trajectories of individual migrants and the global landscape of migration flows and policymaking. Today, as migration studies is consolidated as a field with dedicated degree programs, departments, and international organizations, this integrative approach has become increasingly influential (Scholten, 2022).

The above summary is brief and incomplete, but I hope that it gives a glimpse of the theoretical and methodological diversity within the field of migration studies, and that you may have spotted some synergies with your own work. The list of recommended texts below will provide an entry point for scholars with a range of interests and methodological strengths, and I particularly recommend Peter Scholten’s (2022) edited volume, which is open access and has several chapters dedicated to the diversity of ontology and methodology in migration studies.

How migration and higher education studies can inform each other

With a view to foregrounding the synergies between migration and higher education studies, and particularly the study of international students, I will now introduce just a couple of the existing issues that I perceive in both fields that demonstrate the potential of greater integration to the benefit of all.

On the one hand, the study of international students by higher education scholars continues to be held back by a lack of theoretical clarity and rigour regarding their migration status and interactions with migration infrastructures. For instance, it is still common to see articles in higher education journals that conflate student mobility and migration, contributing to ongoing confusion regarding their definition in policy/public debate. Other scholars entirely skirt the issue international students' migration status, or casually refer to them as *de facto* migrants. Both approaches undermine attempts to holistically understand international students' practices and journeys in international education. Luckily, there is an easy fix. Migration studies offers a wealth of existing definitions and distinctions that allow us to more accurately reflect the full breadth of international students' experiences and practices, including their interactions with various communities of societal actors and migration infrastructures. Efforts to become more alert to these distinctions will allow higher education scholars individually and as a field to develop more conceptual and theoretical clarity and consistency regarding international students.

On the other hand, migration studies may also benefit from greater attention to higher education research. Interestingly, a number of large-scale studies and systematic reviews of intermediary organizations in migration flows entirely fail to mention schools and universities, despite the quantitative and qualitative significance of international student flows, faculty mobility, and their accompanying dependents. This is a curious blind spot. To demonstrate, both where I was born (the UK) and where I live (Japan), international students are consistently among the largest groups of inbound migrants, but it is sometimes forgotten that all these students rely on their host university to gain and retain their residence status, and that universities also function as the primary medium through which international students interact and intersect with other communities. These interactions make universities more than just an extension of state power – they are a fundamental feature of international students' practices, and a critical enabler of their agency. Higher education scholars, and particularly those reading this website, are acutely aware of these intermediary roles and could be the catalyst of powerful new collaborations to address this and other blind spots within migration studies.

Concluding remarks

It is my hope that this brief introduction to the field of migration studies offers a glimpse into the untapped potential of the integration of higher education and migration studies. Both are interdisciplinary fields that, when applied to research (with) international students, offer untapped potential in seeking to understand the processes and outcomes of student mobility, and to develop an inclusive theory of student migration. Of course, this introduction is partial and inexhaustive, and I would encourage readers to explore the resources below.

References

- Bakewell, O. (2010). Some reflections on structure and agency in migration theory. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(10), 1689–1708.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2010.489382>
- Bakewell, O., De Haas, H., & Kubal, A. (2012). Migration Systems, Pioneer Migrants and the Role of Agency. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 11(4), 413–437.
<https://doi.org/10.1558/jcr.v11i4.413>
- De Haas, H., Castles, S., & Miller, M., J. (2020). *The Age of Migration: Sixth Edition: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (6th ed.). Macmillan International Higher Education.
- King, R., & Raghuram, P. (2013). International Student Migration: Mapping the Field and New Research Agendas. *Population, Space and Place*, 19(2), 127–137.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1746>
- Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A., Taylor, J. E., Population, S., Review, D., & Sep, N. (1993). Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal. *Population and Development Review*, 19(3), 431–466.
- Scholten, P. (Ed.). (2022). *Introduction to Migration Studies: An Interactive Guide to the Literatures on Migration and Diversity*. Springer.

Additional Resources

Introductory reading in migration studies

Brettell, C. B., & Hollifield, J. F. (Eds.). (2023). *Migration Theory: Talking across Disciplines*. Routledge.

De Haas, H., Castles, S., & Miller, M., J. (2020). *The Age of Migration: Sixth Edition: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (6th ed.). Macmillan International Higher Education.

Foley, N., & Hollifield, J. F. (Eds.). (2022). *Understanding Global Migration*. Stanford University Press.

Haas, H. de. (2023). *How Migration Really Works*.

<https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/455478/how-migration-really-works-by-haas-hein-de/9780241632208>

Scholten, P. (2022). *Introduction to migration studies: An interactive guide to the literatures on migration and diversity*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92377-8>

Editorials regarding research in international student migration

King, R., & Raghuram, P. (2013). International Student Migration: Mapping the Field and New Research Agendas. *Population, Space and Place*, 19(2), 127–137. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1746>

Riaño, Y., Van Mol, C., & Raghuram, P. (2018). New directions in studying policies of international student mobility and migration. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 16(3), 283–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2018.1478721>

Full length books

Lomer, S. (2017). *Recruiting International Students in Higher Education: Representations and Rationales in British Policy*. Springer International Publishing.

Robertson, S. (2013). *Transnational Student-Migrants and the State*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Soong, H. (2015). *Transnational Students and Mobility: Lived Experiences of Migration*. Routledge.

Tannock, S. (2018). *Educational Equality and International Students: Justice Across Borders?* Palgrave Macmillan.

Thomas, S. (2024, February). *Indebted Mobilities: Indian Youth, Migration, and the Internationalizing University*, Thomas. University of Chicago Press.

Exemplary studies

Baas, M. (2019). The Education-Migration Industry: International Students, Migration Policy and the Question of Skills. *International Migration*, 57(3), 222–234.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12540>

Liu-Farrer, G., & Tran, A. H. (2019). Bridging the Institutional Gaps: International Education as a Migration Industry. *International Migration*, 57(3), 235–249.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12543>

O'Connor, S. (2018). Problematising strategic internationalisation: Tensions and conflicts between international student recruitment and integration policy in Ireland. *Globalisation, Societies & Education*, 16(3), 339–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2017.1413979>

Roberts, R. (2021). 'His visa is made of rubber': Tactics, risk and temporary moorings under conditions of multi-stage migration to Australia. *Social and Cultural Geography*, 22(3), 319–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2019.1584826>

Tran, L. T., Tan, G., Bui, H., & Rahimi, M. (2023). International graduates on temporary post-graduation visas in Australia: Employment experiences and outcomes. *Population, Space and Place*, 29(1), e2602. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2602>

Organizations

International Migration Research Network (IMISCOE): <https://www.imiscoe.org/>

Related: Migration Research Hub: <https://migrationresearch.com/>

Network of Migration Research on Africa (NOMRA): <https://nomra.wordpress.com/>

Metropolis International: <https://metropolis-international.org/>

Journals

International Migration: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14682435>

International Migration Review: <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mrx>

Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjms20/current>

Journal of Studies in International Education: <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/jsi>

Journal of International Migration and Integration: <https://link.springer.com/journal/12134>

Population, Space and Place: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/15448452>

Migration Studies: <https://academic.oup.com/migration>

Comparative Migration Studies: <https://comparativemigrationstudies.springeropen.com/>





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