



COVID-19 Migration Policy Measures for International Students and Graduate Job Searchers: A Lost Round in the Battle for Brains

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Global policy responses to COVID-19 in terms of international students migration and foreign graduate job searchers demonstrate huge disparities and insecurities regarding their migration status. Three main issues can be distinguished in COVID-19 related visa and migration policy measures for international students and graduate job searchers: Policies on returning or remaining during the lockdown, policies on extending students' and job searchers legal stay and policies allowing new students to arrive. This contribution maps migration policy responses in five popular destination countries across the globe. This mapping exercise identifies three patterns of response to COVID-19: Facilitating, blocking or ambiguous. The policy responses are critically assessed in the context of the so called "battle for brains." From a concise overview of the interests at stake with international student migration policy a change in perspective from development of the country of origin to development of the labor markets and innovation in the countries of destination can be distinguished. International students are stuck between the interests of their countries of origin, the destination countries and HEI, and their own interests in receiving an international education, onward migration, and an international career are not always represented. The COVID-19 crisis has shown how in some countries of destination, international students and graduates, although high-skilled, and "home-trained," are not treated as belonging to the country of destination. Their home is still in their country of origin. The crisis reveals that they may be little more than future (high-skilled) guest workers, disposed of in times of crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19, international student migration, foreign graduate job searchers, migration policy, high-skilled migration, HEI, global policies

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INTRODUCTION

Global policy responses to COVID-19 in terms of international students and foreign graduate job searchers demonstrate huge disparities and insecurities regarding their migration status. In the past decades, international students were highly coveted migrants. In fact, some higher educational institutions build their business model on international students. Migration policies have been adjusted to facilitate the international students to remain, search for jobs and stimulate innovation and the economies of the home nations of their alma mater. When the world went into a lockdown in early spring 2020, international students and foreign graduate job searchers were at

a loss. Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) were at a loss too, investing in online teaching and expecting fewer international students to arrive for the 2020–2021 academic year. Across the globe, international students and educational institutions have cried out for a solution to international students' despair. Students have lost income from often precarious student jobs and might not be able to pay next years' tuition fees or their subsistence, and they are also concerned for their future careers. Some have gone home with the help of their countries of origin, others stay put or simply cannot go home because of border closures.

This contribution maps global policy responses to international student migration and COVID-19. International students are, following the UNESCO definition, students "who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin" (UNESCO, 2020). Physical movement is key, and it is this movement that COVID-19 migration measures (have) and are impeding. Graduate job searchers are not defined globally, but in the growing body of literature on the topic, they have become a distinct group of international labor migrants (see e.g., a special issue edited by Faggian et al., 2017). This mapping exercise concerns five top twenty popular destination countries (United States, Canada, Australia, France, and the Netherlands). I identify three patterns of response to COVID-19: Firstly, a policy and discourse of continued welcome and facilitation of international students, seen in for example in the case of Canada and France; Secondly, a blocking attitude, as seen in the USA; and thirdly, an ambiguous policy, for example as seen in Australia and the Netherlands. The country of origin perspective is relevant too, but left aside in this contribution.

Early August 2020, three main issues can be distinguished in COVID-19 related visa and migration policy measures for international students and graduate job searchers: Policies on returning or remaining during the lockdown, policies on extending students' and job searchers legal stay and policies allowing new students to arrive. Pre-COVID-19, receiving countries' need for international students had been dominating migration policies and exempting the international students from the anti-migrant politics. According to the OECD (2019, p. 14) the internationalization of higher education has resulted in increased movement of international students—in 2017 around 1,450,000 visas were granted to tertiary-level students and over 3.5 million international students enrolled globally. COVID-19 has upset this international playfield: For the new academic year 2020–2021, 41% of international students have changed their plans and choose to study in a different country than their originally intended destination (Studyportals, 2020).

After a brief overview of the development of international student migration and graduate job searchers, I continue with mapping some policy approaches followed by a discussion. The contribution is based on an online search of websites [performed between April 1 and August 11, 2020 on [timeshighereducation.com](https://www.timeshighereducation.com), [universityworldnews.com](https://www.universityworldnews.com), [studyinternational.com](https://www.studyinternational.com), [studyportals.com](https://www.studyportals.com) and media ([financialtimes.com](https://www.financialtimes.com)), and snowballing into government websites and local media].

A CONCISE SUMMARY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MIGRATION POLICY

International student migration once was a form of development "aid": Foreign students, often from the global South, would come to the "West" and would return home upon completion of their studies (Altbach, 1989)—bringing home knowledge would help their countries of origin "develop." Keeping these students from going home was perceived as unethical brain drain. In the 1990's the debate shifted to a discourse of brain gain, train, and circulation (Robertson, 2006; Dassin et al., 2017). International student migration turned into a "battle for brains," a booming business for receiving countries, whose HEI and economies in general thrive on international students: In the USA, in 2016, international students were responsible for over \$32 billion worth of contributions to the economy (Foundation for Economic Education, 2018).

Growing international alumni communities and global citizenship became a goal of international education (Knight, 2012), the idea is that student mobility develops global citizens intercultural aware and with knowledge and commitment to global issues. However, what has possibly grown to be just as important is international students' (post-study) work. In times of skill shortages and demographic changes, the European Union for instance, through Directive 2016/801/EU, aims not just to achieve "internationalization" of education and research by attracting students and researchers from outside the EU, it also grants international students a right to work (since 2018 a minimum of 16 h per week); additionally, they should be stimulated to stay in the EU for (self)employment after their studies for which EU member states are to grant graduates at least a 9-month period, after their studies, to find (high skilled) employment. The brain drain is only mentioned on the side, the need for a new well-trained work force seems key. This fits with the observation on the Asia-Pacific region where student migration and high-skilled migration are increasingly entangled; opportunities for onward migration have become one of the deciding factors for international students to pick their destination country and university (Baas, 2019).

International students are stuck between in a mix of interests of countries of origin and destination, HEI, and their own interests, which are not always represented. COVID-19 has jeopardized their ambition not just for acquiring a degree abroad, but also for onward migration as a foreign graduate job searcher and high-skilled migrant worker, and possibly for a future international career.

COVID-19 RESPONSES

Facilitating Migration Policies

In both Canada and France, at least at the time of writing, facilitating the continuation of international student migration is more important than either the fear for spreading of the virus through international students' mobility or the fear for international students and graduates taking jobs and possibly

leaving national work force unemployed. Immigration policy and international student interests are in line. As before COVID-19, international student migration is still supported by HEI and government migration policies. Anecdotal evidence from media reports, however, presents a less facilitating picture of stranded students during the lockdown.

In Canada the facilitating nature is illustrated by three policy measures: Firstly, online-only teaching or temporary closure of a HEI would not jeopardize students' residence status as long as they stay enrolled in their HEI and continue to take part in the online program. If a HEI is permanently closed due to COVID-19, students have 150 days to either enroll at another HEI, change their residence status or leave Canada. HEI are asked to provide international students leaving Canada with a letter of support for future visa applications. Secondly, students can increase their number of hours at work off campus (usually 20 h) if they provide COVID-19 related essential services. The Canadian measures will be in effect until (at the time of writing) August 31, 2020.

Although in France hundreds of international students were stranded, lost their student jobs and had little money left for food during the lockdown, France is looking forward to welcoming (back) international students. This welcoming immediately followed the June 11, 2020 communication of the European Commission presenting a roadmap to opening up travel from outside the EU. It called on EU member states to "ensure that those traveling to study are exempted, together with highly skilled non-EU workers, if their employment is necessary from an economic perspective and the work cannot be postponed or performed abroad" (European Commission, 2020). The French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs tweeted on June 16 that as of July 1 visa and resident permit applications by international students will be processed as a priority and international students will be allowed to travel to France, no matter where they are traveling from. The "importance of the attractiveness of French higher education" is, once again, the reason for facilitating student migration (France24, 2020).

Blocking Migration Policies

The USA was late to respond to the pandemic, but early March 2020, HEI were already advised to cancel international student exchange programs and tell their international students to go home (and American students to return home), in order to prevent spreading the virus (National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD), 2020). This advice was followed by a rather restrictive migration policy for which American universities took the federal immigration authorities to court. The Trump administration policy published on July 6 said that international students were either to transfer schools or leave the country if their classes were going to be entirely online. This was a rather extreme policy response to the COVID-19 crisis with respect to the approximately one million international students in the USA. It didn't hold long. More than 200 HEI's backed the lawsuit initiated by Harvard and MIT and by July 14 the Trump administration reversed the policy. Some of the changes might seemingly be consequences of COVID-19 migration policies. However, the number of international students coming to the

USA was already going down and uncertainties over work visas were already at play (Demirci, 2019).

Ambiguous Migration Policies

Australia's policy response is more ambiguous. International education generates billions of dollars each year (Knight, 2012). Like in the USA, international students were advised to return home. Not all of them did or could. Many lost their casual student job during the lockdown and had to turn to foodbanks for daily meals (Bavas, 2020). Australia did introduce a special 1-year visa extension to those stuck in Australia (with an expiring visa) which would allow migrants to work in essential professions. This measure was to help, amongst others, international students unable to return home due to travel bans (Study International, 2020). However, those migrants who are not performing essential work and are on a temporary visa, are not eligible for government help, and if they cannot make ends meet they are asked to go home (Stayner, 2020). Furthermore, Australia maintains an international travel ban until January 2021 but is still considering to what extent this will apply to international students. If they wait too long, international students will choose different destinations. In the meantime, Australian universities are laying-off teaching staff in order to survive (WSWS.org, 2020).

As mentioned, in June the European Commission (2020) called for re-opening HEI for new international students. Until then, each EU member state chose its own path for its international students. We've seen how France chose a welcoming path although those stuck in France during the lockdown received little help. A smaller and less popular destination country in the EU is the Netherlands. It is an example of an ambiguous approach toward international students. Graduates in the Netherlands can apply for a residence permit for an orientation year to look for a job as a high-paid migrant worker, within 3 years after graduation. If graduates find a job as a high-paid migrant before the end of their orientation year, they are eligible for continued residence as migrant workers. Former graduates are allowed to meet a low salary requirement. However, if they fail to find a job during the orientation year, a higher salary requirement is then applicable (which employers are unlikely to pay for, especially for a recent graduate) (de Lange et al., 2019, p. 18).

Not all international students left the Netherlands to wait out the lockdown at home. Those that remained lobbied for an extension of their visas, like Canada and Australia implemented. Like elsewhere, they lacked income (thus), could not complying with the required subsistence level, had difficulty in finding a job before the end of their orientation year, and more generally, faced visa expiration. Three measures combine a facilitating and blocking attitude: First, international students were temporarily exempted from the obligatory subsistence level (but not supported otherwise). Second, the orientation year would not be extended. Thus, international graduates who fail to find a job within their orientation year have to leave. Third, and this is how the Dutch government services the interests of international students but even more so national labor market needs, the low salary threshold remains in force for 3 years after the end of their orientation year. So if they succeed (from abroad)

in finding a job that would qualify for a high-paid migrant status, the graduates are welcome to return. The government explained its choice with reference to the time it will take for the labor market to be back on track; granting international students an extension of their right to remain would, not be useful as long as employers are not hiring. Returning, if that is an option, or remaining as irregular migrants is the looming scenario at the moment. Although visas might be available for new students Dutch HEI decided not to welcome exchange students in the first semester of the new academic year, uncertain of what kind of education they could offer them and out of fear of spreading the virus.

DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 crisis has laid bare an ongoing fundamental shift in international student migration, which was once a means to develop talent from less developed countries and through them aid these countries in their development. However, it has now become an instrument of “reverse development”: International students from countries like China and India bring their talent and money to support economies, labor markets and the demographic needs in receiving countries, and help cover the costs of HEI who have built, in some cases, a business model around international students.

The COVID-19 crisis has shown how in some countries of destination, international students and graduates, although high-skilled and “home-trained,” are not treated as belonging to the country of destination, their home is still in their country of origin; the crisis reveals that they may be little more than future (high-skilled) guest workers. Due to the COVID-19 crisis there may no longer be work for them, maybe apart from some essential jobs in health care. Some international students might have been in receiving countries for 4 years and in search for permanent jobs. Still, the push on returning home during COVID-19 lockdowns and the slow opening up (mostly only for those with a job, or already enrolled at a HEI before the lockdown

and holding a residence permit) shows that students and graduate job searchers were not full members of the society that educated them. They are easily cast off. With their (forced) departure and lack of new international students coming in, restrictive COVID-19 migration policies altered the landscape of HEI in some of the receiving countries (for example Australia). In others, such “protectionist” migration policies lead to legal conflicts between HEI and the immigration authorities (for example the USA). We have also seen a turn to protect national workforce from the uncertain times to come (for example the Netherlands). Again, elsewhere authorities and HEI aim at keeping an open climate and welcome international students back and anew (such as in France). Future research may reveal underlying reasons for the different attitudes beyond HEI lobbying and political pressure.

The crisis reveals that in migration policy, international students may be little more than future (high-skilled) guest workers, disposed of in times of crisis. Border closures, forced return home, and uncertainty over visas will not easily keep the aim of raising global citizens alive: receiving countries and their HEI risk losing a round in the “battle for brains.” Maybe, for starters, we need to take out the “crossing of national borders” in the UNESCO definition of international students and include virtual movement across borders into HEI to keep the opportunities of raising global citizens with intercultural skills. Restrictive migration policies not just designed for health protection should not stand in the way of raising a next generation of global citizens.

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The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Conflict of Interest: The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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