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Gendering International Student Migration: A Comparison of UK and Indian Students' Motivations and Experiences of Studying Abroad

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Abstract

This paper breaks new ground in two respects. First, it is comparative. Most studies of

Do the school-background characteristics of students, and their motivations for going abroad to pursue higher education, differ across different types of origin country, taking the case of the UK and India as examples?

Are there gendered differences in the characteristics, motivations and experiences of male and female students who study abroad?

To the extent that they exist, do these gendered differences express themselves differently between student-origin countries with varying economic and cultural characteristics, again taking the UK and India as examples?

We shall describe the research methods used to gather data to respond to these research questions presently. First, we give a brief overview of the field of ISM, paying particular attention to those aspects of the phenomenon which are the most pertinent to our study.

ISM: defining and theorising the field

ISM is an important yet hitherto under-appreciated component of global migration. For example, it was only in 2008 that the International Organization for Migration's periodic 'world migration' reports recognised the importance of ISM in global migration dynamics (IOM 2008: 105–123). In recent years, global ISM has been growing at about 8 per cent annually, much faster than the total international migration, and fractionally faster than the

students are oriented to the anglophone countries of the developed world; UK students are split between overseas destinations such as the US and Australia, and European countries, including Ireland, France and Germany.

For the purposes of this study, we define an international student as someone who follows an entire degree programme outside his or her country of origin. Hence we are only interested in what is called 'degree mobility' and not in so-called 'credit mobility', whereby a short-term

Secondly, we see ISM as both *a product and an underlying mechanism of the globalisation of higher education*. As Sidhu (20006) has emphasised, the commodification of higher education is the consequence of global processes in which higher education is being sold within a global market place. The international marketing of higher education has become a multi-billion-dollar global business with powerful supply and demand factors: countries and

The third conceptual frame considers ISM as part of *global youth mobility cultures*, where the freedom to travel and to ‘explore’ different places and cultures is seen as a desirable lifestyle attribute for middle-class global youth. This conceptualisation takes its inspiration from the post-2000 mobilities paradigm in sociology, anthropology and human geography, which privileges the *movement* of people, things and images over their static distribution in settlements, classes and other ‘containers’. A notable paradox is that the main protagonists of the ‘mobilities turn’ (principally Urry 2007; see also Adey 2010; Cresswell 2006) scarcely mention international student mobility as a relevant contemporary example of their genre of work.

Under the youth mobilities approach, ISM is seen partly as an end in itself: as an exciting personal experience, an ‘adventure’. The study-stay abroad becomes a life-stage ‘consumption good’ corresponding to a ‘

a paper questionnaire survey of the attitudes and intentions of 1,400 final-year school students towards studying abroad;
an online questionnaire survey of 560 UK students enrolled in universities in the USA, Australia and several European countries; and
face-to-face interviews with 64 UK-origin students studying abroad, chiefly in the US.

Publications arising from the project include the report to BIS (Findlay and King 2010), a specific study on school-leavers' attitudes and plans for study abroad (King *et al.* 2011) and papers on the student experience of pursuing higher education abroad, again chiefly in the United States (Findlay *et al.* 2012; King *et al.* 2013). Full details of the various research methods used in the project, including the questionnaire and interview schedules, are given in Findlay and King (2010: 46–67).

The second project was a doctoral thesis on Indian student migration (Sondhi 2013). Although this was an independent study, some of its methods were deliberately patterned on those of the UK study in order to ensure some cross-project comparability. Hence a similar online questionnaire was used to elicit responses from Indian students studying for a degree in

I was determined to attend a world-class university.
I want an international career and this was a first step towards it.
I saw studying abroad as a unique adventure.
My family was very keen for me to study abroad/in a particular country.

In the UK survey, two other questions were included:

Rising fee levels in the UK made me explore other study locations.

as possible, based on our knowledge of the wider sample of voices and the broad themes which consistently emerge.

Students were contacted via a variety of access routes: personal networks of the researchers and their colleagues, universities' international offices, student associations, Facebook groups, social events and some snowballing. The campus environment makes it relatively easy to set up meetings in neutral spaces such as coffee-bars and other common socialising areas.

All the interview samples were gender-balanced. There was, however, one key difference between the two groups surveyed: a much higher proportion of Indian students – about three-quarters – were postgraduate students; for the UK students, the undergraduate/postgraduate split was close to even. This represents the reality of these two ISM flows and is not a result of sample bias. For further details on the interview surveys, access strategies and other logistical aspects of the fieldwork, see Findlay and King (2010: 24–26, 66–67) and Sondhi (2013: 66–82, 250–252).

Online survey results: motivations for study abroad

The questionnaire survey yields relatively robust data for comparing selected characteristics about the two groups of students, especially their main motives for deciding to pursue higher education abroad. For this preliminary analysis we compare questionnaire results from 553 UK students studying in the US, Ireland, Australia, France and Germany (265 males, 288 females) with 157 Indian students in the US, Canada, the UK, Australia and Germany (87 males, 70 females).

Table 2. School background and financial sources of Indian and UK students studying abroad (percent data)

	India	UK
Type of secondary school attended		
state school	0	54
fee-paying (private) school	98	33

are included in the non-state educational sector, then four out of ten UK students come from the private or 'independent' sector (which includes the counterintuitively named 'public schools')

difference narrows to only 6 when the ‘very important’ and the ‘important’ scores are combined, indicating that, for UK students, this operates more as a secondary factor in their thinking whereas, for Indian students, it functions alongside the desire to attend a top university as a prime factor. The Indian survey data also indicate that there is a good deal of interest in using the student-visa route as a means of facilitating longer-term migration out of India. One in five Indian respondents saw this as a very important factor governing their decision to study abroad, and nearly twice that number when the ‘important’ category is added, with male students recording higher scores than females on this factor. To conclude on this point, it seems that, whereas the well-established Indian global business and professional diaspora provides an exemplary and attractive setting for Indian students to want to settle abroad, compared to the more limited opportunities in the Indian graduate labour market, for British students their envisioned career trajectories are more likely to involve a return to the UK’s buoyant yet globally connected labour market, rather than the wish or necessity to settle abroad.

Seeing study abroad as a ‘unique adventure’ also scores highly for both genders – slightly higher for UK than for Indian students. ‘Family encouragement’ to study abroad is the fourth factor common to both questionnaire surveys and records lower frequencies of ‘very important’ and ‘important’ ratings. The only gender contrast here is the higher rating recorded by UK women for this being ‘very important’ (15 per cent vs 8 per cent for men(

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studying at high-prestige universities. This ‘world-class’ education yields two obvious benefits: it can give students an advantage in the ‘home’ labour market over those who are ‘locally’ educated and who lack this international exposure, and it can be a very helpful step towards establishing an international career, either in the country of study or in another country, or indeed at home in a globally oriented business or corporation. Evidence accumulates that certain kinds of employer value highly the international, intercultural and multilingual experience that study abroad can bring, perhaps even more so if it is combined with ‘local’ knowledge. However, it is important to acknowledge the existence of systemic barriers to entry for non-native graduates in the labour markets of destination countries, even if the discriminating nature of such practices is beyond the scope of this discussion.

Attending a ‘world-class’ university

According to Findlay *et al.* (2012: 120) and Yang (2003), the internationalisation of higher education has proceeded alongside increased differentiation of the university system across the globe. Certain countries are able to position themselves as purveyors of a world-class university education. They do this partly out of their long-standing reputation for academic quality and prestige and partly by reference to international league tables that universities scramble to increase their rankings on, despite misgivings about the true meaning of such metrics-based tables. And within these countries, international and national league tables differentiate gradations of ‘elite’ universities and ‘the rest’.

For the consumers of a world-class education, there are several benefits. The most obvious one is a leg-up in the career stakes. It is well-known that a degree from ‘Oxbridge’ or from Harvard and other ‘Ivy League’ schools, or from one of the French ‘*grandes écoles*’, can be an entry-point to the best careers in government, academia and other key professions in the respective countries. As Brooks and Waters (2011), Findlay *et al.* (2012), Waters (2006) and others have shown, it is a means of distinguishing oneself in the pursuit of superior status and difference, not only for the individual but also in terms of reproducing and enhancing the family’s social class position.

In the Indian case, acquiring a world-class education abroad is a pragmatic response to structural barriers within the Indian higher education system. The problems here are threefold. The first issue is socio-demographic: a rapidly growing youth population with middle-class aspirations has led to an increase in demand for higher education, putting pressure on the existing structures of education and making the system even more competitive than previously, especially for the country’s top universities and specialised higher education institutions – a syndrome noted by Waters (2006) in the case of Hong Kong students moving abroad to study.

The second issue is about the experiences of students in Indian universities, where facilities are often poor and lectures overcrowded. Students following university education abroad value the more interactive mode of small-group teaching and the specific value of Master’s and doctoral programmes which are not available in India or, if they are, they are considered of lower quality and prestige than postgraduate qualifications from ‘Western’ countries.

The third issue is about the rapidly evolving nature of the Indian economy and its neoliberal turn with increasing privatisation, stalled public funding for higher education, and the establishment of private universities and of campuses built by overseas universities (Agarwal 2009). The opening up of Indian markets and the economy to the world has led to demands from the Indian labour market for highly skilled and trained workers within the STEM fields, particularly IT, and for expertise in business studies, commerce and economics.

Whilst the existing system has supported demand in STEM subjects, it lags in matching demand for business studies education, including specialised training in subsectors within this

didn't consider any other university in Australia to be world-renowned. A lot of the literature I was reading was written by people at [names university].

In the case of both UK and Indian students, then, not only do degrees from particular 'prestige' universities carry the internationally recognised weight of global recognition, but also universities are embedded in local and national contexts. This means that the students generate social and human capital that is both local and global, and gives them potential access to labour markets both in the country/region where their chosen university is situated, and in the international/global market; for some, that prestige can be carried back home should they decide to return to seek employment or for personal reasons.

Adventure

The third common motivation, with rather similar survey values between the UK and Indian samples (Table 3), is the opportunity that study abroad offers for travel and adventure, albeit within the relatively 'safe' environment of the university setting. This desire is partly embedded, again, in the drive to distinguish oneself from others by gaining the advantages discussed above. But it is also a desire to learn about another culture, to find out what one is capable of and to belong to the 'mobile' or 'travelling' youth culture. Those going abroad to study are intrinsically aware that they are migrating to another place with a different culture and, on the whole, they are keen to learn and to gain tacit knowledge of that other, new, place. Hence study abroad is seen as an opportunity for experiential learning, with the clear potential of becoming a transformative experience; a new departure as an individual separate from their family, previous friends and the 'known' environment of the home country in general. Richa, an Indian postgraduate student in the UK, described how her student migration was a turning-point in her thinking – about herself and the 'global exposure' she was seeking:

I went on summer school during my undergraduate [degree], and I had a great time! I realised that there was something in my life that was missing: this global exposure. When you are travelling in India you are travelling with your family, your friends... But when you are studying with other people, hanging out with them, living, eating and talking with them everyday, you get to know their cultures. You learn about lives outside of yourself. So this was a changing-point in my thinking – about why I should go out [of India] to study.

Similarly, Fiona (UK undergraduate studying in Australia) articulated her desire to 'experience another culture', as well as harking back to her father's spending his 'gap year' in Australia:

It is also clear that prospective internationally mobile students not only construct for themselves the identity of the 'youthful adventurer' but they are also consumers of marketing and propaganda images produced by different countries' tourism agencies and by the universities themselves. Universities' marketing strategies build the image of the international student as a 'youth traveller': even the 'Asian learner' can be an explorer (Singh and Doherty 2008). These marketing packages put out by universities' international offices are complemented by global media portrayals – of the quaint English village or life in 'London town'; of the American dream, typified by images of New York, Florida or California; or of the relaxed and laid-back Australian lifestyle, with its surfing beaches and 'barbies'. Of course, the spaces that students do end up occupying lie in the interstices between the 'imagined' and 'real' everyday life of the host country, and 'campus life', especially for those who stay in university accommodation, can be far removed from the grittier aspects of life in New York, Toronto or London.

Family links

The final common factor in our comparative analysis is family connections. Although we treated this as a separate factor in the survey, in practice it intersects with other elements in the decision to study abroad, not least in the way that this can make it a family decision rather than an individual one, even if this does not discount the circumstance where the basic decision is taken by the student, who then receives family endorsement and perhaps financial help.

From the interviews, the family dimension emerged in three separate ways. First, it can be clearly seen as an 'investment' by the family in order to ensure a successful future for the student son or daughter.

More interesting is the relationship between gender, study abroad and parents' social class (here proxied by education) in India. As Table 4 shows, significantly more female students came from highly educated parental backgrounds than males, whose parents were of more diverse educational backgrounds (chi-square test for the male vs female component of the table, df3, significant at $p < 0.01$). Nearly three-quarters of female respondents had both parents university-educated, compared to just over half of males, whilst male respondents were more than twice as likely to have neither parent university-educated. Our interpretation of this is that only girls/women whose parents are more educ

and regulation of sexuality, especially of women, in order to maintain family honour and the purity of class, caste and lineage.

Patrilocality also configures differential access to spatial mobility for sons and daughters within national and transnational space. Sons are more readily permitted to move to another Indian city, or abroad, for their higher education; daughters are much more controlled in this regard, except in the context of movement from their natal household to the marital household upon marriage (Radhakrishnan 2009). However, this is far from the whole story, and the interview data revealed other variations on this theme, such as a readiness amongst liberal families to let their daughters travel abroad for university education, partly for genuinely educational reasons and sometimes on the supposition that these young women would be 'lost' to their parents when they got married anyway. Conversely, there were cases where there was extreme reluctance to let a son move abroad for fear that he would not return to take the responsibility for caring for his parents in their old age.

It would take many interview case-studies of parents and students to empirically illustrate all the above points, so let us take just one. We choose this one because of the contrast in the views of the mother (opposed to the move of her son abroad) and the father (supportive) and because of the difference in the narrative offered in the interview and the narrative in the narrative.

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theatre group. As this extract from her interview shows, she enjoyed the ‘theatre’ part of the experience, but was very uncomfortable with other aspects of the expected performance of femininity in that particular social space:

I really like the theatre ... [but] in the theatre club all my friends were from here [i.e. ‘white’ Canadians] ... I was the only brown girl. So it was really hard ... everything so different ... I guess the way that they were brought up here was very different from the way I was brought up. I was brought up as a secluded Indian girl and they were more open and outgoing in that sense... They were always going out drinking and partying ... crazy and wild ... and all these things were new to me... I didn’t really want to get into those things.

Within the theatre group, the signifiers of the dominant performance of femininity included going out clubbing on a regular basis, drinking alcohol and [hinted at rather than stated explicitly in Prita’s narrative] the norm of sexual relations. This led to a cultural dissonance with what Prita was comfortable with.³

As a result of resisting this pressure to follow a specific heterosexual feminine performance that she felt was being forced on her, Prita chose to leave the theatre group and, in her second year, joined a more familiar group, the Indian students’ association, where she found a more congenial ‘matrix of intelligibility’.

I felt that I needed to connect with people ... so that’s why I joined the [Indian] student club, and I made a lot of friends that way... We share the same background so it’s easier to connect. I was more comfortable with this crowd; I wasn’t really comfortable with the other group because I didn’t really know what was happening...

Mayank (who, for the record, was co-habiting with his Indian girlfriend in Toronto – something

others due to the wishes of their parents, including pressures to get married. Thus, for women who returned in their mid-20s, this was often regarded as a temporary return to the parental home, until they moved to another household on marriage.

Different return typologies also reflected the extent to which the interviewees had settled into the Canadian university and social context, or had remained somehow 'out-of-place'. Here we again pick up Butler's powerful notion of 'matrix of intelligibility' to illustrate the extent to which the participants had felt 'in' or 'out' of place whilst abroad – or, to use another pair of conceptual analogies, whether their (self-)designation as out-of-place 'strange bodies' (Ahmed 2000) increased their 'homing desire' (Brah 1996). As in the previous section on gendered experiences in Canada, we illustrate some of the above with two carefully chosen participants, one male and one female, adding a couple of quotes from parents to complement the overall picture.

First, we hear from Nitin, a PhD student and teaching assistant. In the following quote, Nitin's desire to go back to India is palpable, and takes shape against his multiple experiences

it difficult to adapt back to the regimes of her parental home and made some acute observations on the contrasts between her utilisation of mundane public spaces in London and Delhi.

When I was in London, if I wanted some chocolate in the middle of the night, I'd just put on a jacket and walk down the road to the shop. I can't do that here ... I have a curfew here; I have to ask permission to go outside.⁴ Even for getting a bar of chocolate.

And about the wider public-space atmosphere in Delhi:

People in India, if they think you look strange, or doing something different, they will stare. Just stare... Men in India – they just stare, they follow you with their eyes; it's very uncomfortable.

In the end, however, Vani feels she

Conclusion

Let us return to the three research questions set out in the introduction in order to review and evaluate the key findings. The first question was about variation in the *background characteristics and motivations for studying abroad across the UK–India comparison*. Based on results from the two online questionnaire surveys, summarised in Tables 2 and 3, and their associated discussion in the first empirical section of the paper, we find remarkably little difference. Both the Indian and UK students' backgrounds were predominantly middle class or higher. The main difference is the gendered one for Indian students, whereby male students are drawn from a slightly wider socio-economic background (as measured by the proxy of parental education, Table 4). For both sets of students (Indian and British), there were three key determinants stimulating students to pursue higher education abroad (Table 3):

- the desire to study at a prestigious or world-class university;
- the acquisition of an international education in order to build a successful career as a highly skilled graduate, either in the home country or in the global labour marketplace; and
- the wish to study abroad as an imagined unique adventure and a potentially transformative experience.

The respondents' ratings for each of these three factors (as 'important', 'very important' etc.) proved to be surprisingly similar between British and Indian students, and with minimal gender differences, too. The main differences, which were still rather modest in scale, were between Indian respondents' greater emphasis on careers, and British students' slightly higher rating of the 'adventure' factor.

Taken together, these results speak directly to the existing theoretical framings of ISM as a sub-type of high-skilled migration through a quest for a world-class education, as a part of adventure-oriented youth mobility cultures, and as a mechanism of class difference and elite reproduction. All three frames illustrate the ways in which ISM unites local with global dimensions of higher education within a broader globalisation scenario.

From what has already been synthesised in relation to answers to the first research question above, we have already partially answered the second research question, which was about *gendered differences in the characteristics and motivations* of the two groups of study-abroad students. However, when we turn to the interview data and to accounts of *experiences* rather than motivations, we find more nuanced results emerging from the narratives of the students, especially from the Indian participants (including parents), which revealed extended intra-family negotiations over the decision to study abroad.

This leads us to the most complex and extensive set of findings, which was in answer to the third question – *gendered differences in experiences of students from different national backgrounds*, taking India and the UK as comparators. Reading the transcripts of the British students' interviews failed to elicit any marked or consistent 'gender stories'. We ascribed this to the fact that the interviewees were in countries (the US, Australia, Ireland etc.) where the 'performances' of gender in student-inhabited spaces were broadly similar to what had been experienced in the UK. In the Indian students' narratives, however, the gender themes were

their families when they got married. Female students, who tended to have adjusted better to life abroad, faced more difficulties upon return, even to the point of feeling out of place there and wanting to re-

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