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## Contrasting trends of contemporary migration and mobility with a focus on international students

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# Contrasting trends of contemporary migration and mobility with a focus on international students

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Abstract: This article offers a discussion of current patterns and dynamics in contemporary migration and mobility, with a focus on international student flows. It draws on data and estimates from the United Nations (UN) and other international organizations, alongside insights from the migration literature and previous empirical research. Although temporary and seasonal migrants such as workers and students are often excluded from UN statistics, they play a significant role in specific national contexts. While many migrant workers are typically unskilled or face deskilling processes and heightened vulnerability, study abroad (SA) students and highly skilled migrants often occupy a more privileged position. Enabled by affordable transport and information and communication technologies (ICTs), these groups frequently engage in transnational practices and virtual mobility. To better understand the scope of contemporary global migration and mobility, this article draws on empirical research conducted by the author in Southwest France. The investigation centres on how transnational processes shape student mobility, the role of university mobility offices, and the relationship between physical and virtual mobility in shaping international students' integration and ongoing circulation.

Keywords: International Migration, International Mobility, Virtual Mobility, Transnational Practices, International Students

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## Introduction

Compared to the past two centuries, when migration processes were primarily permanent, temporary migration and mobility have become much more common because of the dynamics of globalisation and the availability of more affordable transportation services (Koser, 2007). It is possible to observe a shift from the conventional model of migration, which traditionally consisted in an initial displacement followed by a final return home, to multiple forms of migrations throughout the course of a lifetime of an individual, frequently to various destinations and with sporadic returns home (Koser 2007; ILO 2013; Ruspini 2014). Drawing on available data, literature, and prior empirical research on mobile students and migrants (Tyne & Ruspini 2021; Ruspini, Borràs & Köylü 2023; Ruspini 2024; Köylü & Borràs 2024; Köylü & Borràs 2025), this paper develops a synthesis of current trends in migration and mobility, conceptualised as interconnected human, social, economic, political, and environmental processes, with international students as a focal case.

In this context, data from UNDESA and other international organisations such as OECD, ILO, and UNESCO provide a global comparative framework. In their analysis of global mobility, the UN does not include migrants and mobile individuals who travel seasonally and temporarily for employment or study, even though they are important for some countries (ILO 2013). Temporary entry programmes for employment and education dominate non-family migration in countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, where they consistently exceed permanent admissions. In the United States in 2018, for example, 3.9 million temporary workers and 2.6 million international students were recorded, compared to 1.1 million permanent residents; similar patterns are observed in Australia and Canada (Skeldon 2021: 21–22). In contrast, highly skilled migrants and SA students tend to occupy more privileged positions, often originating from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds (ENIS, n.d.). Moreover, thanks to information and communication technologies (ICT), they can be concurrently involved in various forms of virtual mobility and transnational behaviours without leaving the confines of their home country (DAAD, 2025).

In this perspective, international student mobility is not only a form of spatial movement but also a key component of broader educational trajectories and learning processes. SA shapes students' academic pathways, linguistic development, and intercultural competences, often functioning as a strategic step within longer-term educational and professional projects. At the same time, these trajectories are not solely the result of individual choice. Higher education institutions play a crucial role in structuring mobility opportunities and experiences through admission policies, exchange

programmes, funding schemes, and the support provided by mobility offices. Such institutional frameworks influence who can move, under what conditions, and with what outcomes, thereby mediating the relationship between mobility, learning, and future life chances. Understanding student mobility therefore requires situating individual experiences within these broader educational and institutional contexts.

When considering global data on international migration, even though the number of international migrants has nearly doubled over the past 30 years (UNDESA 2020), recurring crises like the global recession of 2008-2009 and the global COVID-19 pandemic that broke out in early 2020 have threatened this expansion in mobility by driving up unemployment (Taran & Kadysheva, 2022). Millions of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, stateless individuals, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and mobile students have all been impacted by the pandemic globally (Sin et al., 2025).

Comparatively, several quota-based schemes for temporary workers provided by receiving countries were oversubscribed when labour migration started to rebound in 2010, shortly after the recession ended (ILO 2013). The same can be said for the post-pandemic world with the sound recovery of the low-cost transportation which resulted in an increase of mobility (Taran & Kadysheva, 2022). However, despite the resume of transnational mobility after the global pandemic, it is still necessary to evaluate mobility phenomena considering new societal changes such as the widespread transnational virtual practices, which can affect the numbers of individuals physically leaving their countries to go to other destinations. More specifically, it may be necessary to further understand whether these online activities are taking the lead on physical mobility and, in turn the effects that such transnational practices have on the mobility of international students (O'Dowd, 2019).

This paper emerges as a response to the need of knowing more about international student mobility (ISM) and focuses on three research questions: (1) How transnational processes affect the mobility of international students?; (2) What is the role of mobility staff in different locations?; (3) What is the significance of virtual practices in relation to physical mobility and the implications for the inclusion of students into the country of reception or their continued travel between countries?.

## **Theoretical framework**

This theoretical framework is grounded in the intersection of three key dimensions: the shifting relationship between migration and mobility, the concept of transnationalism, and the specific trajectories of international students. Contemporary human movement can no longer be adequately understood through the traditional lens of permanent migration alone. In-

stead, it increasingly encompasses diverse, temporary, and multi-directional forms of mobility that blur the boundaries between migration, circulation, and short-term stays. Within this evolving landscape, international students represent a particularly significant group whose movements challenge clear-cut categorizations.

To capture this complexity, the framework adopts a transnational perspective, emphasizing the ways in which mobile individuals sustain connections across multiple national contexts while navigating educational, social, and professional pathways. International student trajectories are thus analysed not merely as isolated episodes of SA, but as embedded within broader transnational social fields and life-course strategies. This triangulation allows for a more nuanced understanding of how mobility experiences may evolve into longer-term migration, circular patterns, or continued cross-border engagement.

### **A perspective on international migration and mobility**

This section builds on the analytical framework developed by Stephen Castles and Mark Miller (2009) in *The Age of Migration*, using their post-World War II migration maps to highlight the structural link between economic expansion and labour mobility. The post-1950s growth of Western European economies generated sustained demand for migrant labour, initially framed as temporary but progressively consolidating into permanent settlement patterns by the late 1970s (Castles & Miller 2009).

Subsequent developments point to a reconfiguration rather than a decline of migration. The end of labour recruitment after the 1973 oil crisis shifted flows toward family reunification, while the geographical scope of migration expanded beyond Europe. Following the end of the Cold War, migration became increasingly diversified, incorporating irregular movements and forced displacement (Castles & Miller 2009). These transformations underpin the emergence of a more complex and multipolar migration system, in which countries simultaneously function as origins, transit zones, and destinations (Koser 2007). In this context, the historical dominance of South-North migration has given way to a more balanced global pattern, with South-South movements now accounting for a comparable share (UNDESA 2020).

Defining “international migrant” is analytically complex. While distance and duration abroad are central, migrants’ destinations, purposes, and lengths of stay vary widely. The UN defines migrants as individuals living outside their country for a year or more, yet, as Koser (2007: 16) observes, this simplification masks diverse forms of mobility. The IOM offers a broader perspective, encompassing anyone crossing borders or moving within a state away from their habitual residence, regardless of legal status, cause, or duration (Skeldon 2021: 1–2). This definition includes temporary and season-

al migrants, such as agricultural workers, but excludes tourists or short-term business travellers (IOM 2011).

Statistical data on international migration remains highly fragmented and inconsistent due to varied national criteria for data collection, legal definitions, and sociocultural indicators such as ethnicity, gender, or duration of residence (Fassmann & Musil 2013; Fassmann et al. 2009). Migration statistics may be collected at micro or macro levels, focusing either on individuals and communities or on national and transnational trends (Skeldon 2021). Over time, these statistics reveal a transition in some countries from emigration to immigration, and in others a reframing of migration issues in terms of race relations.

By mid-2020, there were approximately 281 million international migrants worldwide, including 33.8 million refugees or asylum seekers (12%) (UNDESA 2020), roughly equivalent to the population of Indonesia. Globally, one in 28 people is an international migrant, yet only 3.5% of the world's population lives outside their country of origin. Over the past 30 years, international migration has nearly doubled, with most migrants now residing in developed regions (UNDESA 2020).

Gender composition varies regionally. Women constitute 48% of international migrants, with the highest proportions in Northern America (51.7%) and Europe (51.5%), followed by Africa (47.2%) and Asia (41.8%). The gender gap in Western Asia reflects high demand for male labour in oil-producing states (OECD-UNDESA 2013). Recent decades have also seen a marked rise in independent female mobility, challenging the traditional “male breadwinner” model and reshaping gendered perspectives on migration (Esping-Andersen 1990). Following this overview, we now examine the temporal dimensions of permanent and temporary migration, and mobility in relation to international migration.

### **From permanent to temporary migration and mobility**

Compared to the past two centuries, when international migration typically entailed permanent relocation, temporary migration has assumed an increasingly prominent role. As discussed above, contemporary migration often unfolds as a sequence of repeated and non-linear movements, involving multiple destinations and occasional returns throughout an individual's life course. This shift has produced what some scholars refer to as “hypermobility” (Urry 2000; Sheller & Urry 2006)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In migration studies, the concept of “hypermobility” refers to the intensified movement and circulation of people, often exceeding the patterns of traditional migration. Authors who have significantly contributed to defining and exploring hypermobility include Sheller and Urry (2006) who introduced the concept of mobilities and highlighted hypermobility as a key aspect.

Within this global landscape, seasonal and temporary migrant workers illustrate both structural gaps and policy blind spots. Despite their growing numbers, they remain largely invisible in major statistical frameworks, emphasizing the need for targeted research and governance (Koser 2007; ILO 2013; Skeldon 2021). Their mobility is shaped by dependency on intermediaries, low skill levels, and vulnerability to exploitation, which in turn constrains integration and long-term trajectories. Economic shocks exacerbate these risks: the 2008–2009 global recession reduced labour migration to countries like Ireland, Spain, and the United States, exposing the fragility of temporary labour markets and prompting tighter permit regulations and quotas, typically excluding skilled migration (OECD 2009: 138). These dynamics underscore that temporary migration should be understood not simply as labour supply, but as a socially and politically mediated process that reflects broader inequalities and regulatory priorities.

Most of legal labour migration for low-skilled jobs in OECD countries is, in fact, through temporary programmes (OECD 2009: 105). Nonetheless, by 2010, as global economic recovery began, the OECD predicted and observed a rebound in labour migration flows. By 2012–2013, many temporary migration programmes with entry quotas were oversubscribed (OECD 2009: 9), demonstrating strong and persistent demand for such mobility channels.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted global mobility, highlighting tensions between economic reliance on migrant labour and restrictive public health measures (Taran & Kadyshcheva 2022). By March 2020, 43,300 travel measures had been enacted or extended, primarily curbing international movement, and by the end of the year this number exceeded 110,000, despite measures to facilitate safer travel, such as negative test requirements and exemptions for specific groups (Benton et al. 2024). This tension highlights how mobility is simultaneously essential and socially regulated, exposing vulnerabilities in both temporary and essential migration systems.

The pandemic disproportionately affected migrants, who faced elevated infection risks, unemployment, and social vulnerability (Taran & Kadyshcheva 2022). In Europe, initial reluctance to admit seasonal workers from Romania, Bulgaria, and Morocco delayed exemptions and chartered travel needed to address labour shortages (Hooper 2021: 1). Pandemic-era restrictions on mobility exceeded expectations and proved difficult to lift, persisting into 2021 despite unclear effectiveness (Benton et al. 2024). Labour migration fell sharply in 2020 but rebounded more quickly in countries that eased travel barriers, while international student flows collapsed, recovering by 2021 in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, but remaining depressed in Australia and New Zealand due to stricter border policies (Benton et al. 2024: 7). Post-pandemic recovery has been uneven, with mobility rebounding but also generating new irregular migration patterns (Benton et al. 2024:

1). Peoples' alternatives for regular movement became more limited, yet the need to move persisted, leading many migrants to use more risky, irregular routes. Longer-distance irregular migration also started to occur. One extreme example is the perilous journey taken by Chinese migrants through the Darién jungle between Colombia and Panama to reach the southern border of the United States of America.

In sum, global health, economic, and financial crises have shaped and often constrained international migration and mobility. These disruptions have curtailed permanent migration while boosting the prominence of temporary mobility, including student flows. Reductions in student mobility have been followed by recoveries, though uneven across regions depending on national migration, travel, and public health policies. In the following section, we shift the focus to international students by examining how transnationalism and mobility manifest in their physical and virtual experiences.

### **Mobility and transnationalism of international students**

This section explores the intersection of mobility and transnationalism through the lens of international student experiences. It does so by moving beyond the constraints of methodological nationalism, which is the traditional reliance on the nation-state as the primary analytical unit in migration studies which has long shaped understandings of social processes (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002: 302). Since the late 1990s, the transnational turn in migration research has encouraged scholars to examine connections across national borders and to conceptualize migrants' lives in relational terms, linking places of origin, transit, and settlement (Amelina, Faist & Nergiz 2013).

Transnationalism refers to cross-border practices and ties that link migrants' lives across multiple contexts. In migration studies, it initially referred to migrants' sustained ties with their countries of origin. Portes et al. (1999: 217) initially framed transnational migration primarily in economic terms, arguing that although cross-border back-and-forth movements had long existed, only recently had they reached the scale and complexity required to constitute an "emergent social field." They highlighted the rise of migrants who "live dual lives," characterized by bilingualism, residence in two countries, and livelihoods sustained through continuous and regular cross-national interactions (Portes et al. 1999: 217).

Building on Bryan Roberts' analysis of the Mexico-U.S. migration system, Portes and colleagues argued that transnational migration takes shape when both the return pull of origin communities and the retention capacity of destination economies are simultaneously strong (Portes et al. 1999: 233). Although early approaches emphasized economic drivers, subsequent scholarship has broadened the analytical focus to incorporate the political,

social, and cultural dimensions of transnationalism (Boccagni 2012). Within this broader scope, “transnationalism from below” refers to everyday practices among working-class or marginalized migrants, while middle-class and highly educated migrants often engage in more institutionalized or hybrid forms of transnationalism. In global cities, for example, transnational identities may form around local experiences rather than national affiliations. Ien Ang (2000) contrasts “long-distance nationalism in transnational virtual space” with “local transnationalism,” the latter understood as the hybridization of cosmopolitan communities sharing physical territory.

Despite their centrality in contemporary mobility, international students have historically been underrepresented in transnationalism research, especially when compared to labour migrants (Alves & King 2022). This gap persists in part due to definitional ambiguities and the diverse geopolitical and socioeconomic contexts that shape student mobility. Whether viewed from the vantage point of a developing country, a former colony, an emerging power like China, or a core versus peripheral European state, interpretations of international student mobility differ significantly. Alves and King (2022) also highlight the need for interdisciplinary and comparative research, standardized data, and the inclusion of gender, class, race, and sexuality in the analysis of student mobility. The implementation of research-policy dialogue in the migration and mobility of international students is the last of the gaps considered by these authors.

Although historically under-studied in migration studies, international student mobility has expanded sharply, rising from around two million in 2000 to 6.4 million in 2021 (UIS 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these trends: between 2019 and 2021, student mobility fell by 6 and 9 percentage points in Australia and New Zealand, respectively, while some European countries, such as Latvia and Slovenia, saw slight increases (OECD 2023). In this context, a clear conceptual distinction between “student migration” and “student mobility” is essential. According to King and Findlay (2012), the difference lies in the scope, duration, and purpose of the movement. In this article, internationally mobile students are defined in line with UNESCO as individuals who have “physically crossed an international border [...] with the objective to participate in educational activities” in a country other than their country of origin. While the length and pathways of such movements differ substantially, the educational purpose of the move remains the defining criterion.

International students are heterogeneous, with experiences shaped by citizenship, class, and origin (Madge et al. 2015). The growth of student mobility has been linked to the globalisation of higher education, the commodification of academic credentials, and intensified competition among universities for international tuition fees. At the same time, declining trans-

portation costs particularly in air travel, have made studying abroad more accessible, albeit in uneven and socially stratified ways (Liu-Farrer 2022). Student mobility is increasingly multidirectional and fluid, often involving stepwise strategies for education and career advancement (Liu-Farrer 2022; Waters & Leung 2022). In some cases, international students adopt a stepwise mobility strategy to achieve educational and career advancement. For example, Liu-Farrer (2022: 302) refers to Collins et al. (2014), who found that postgraduate students in Singapore viewed their degrees from the National University of Singapore as a stepping stone toward eventual study or migration to the United States. These pathways often lead to flexible post-study aspirations. Many students view SA not as a definitive transition to settlement but as a means of becoming “permanently temporary” (Baas 2016; Liu-Farrer 2022; Paul 2022). They aspire to maintain mobility while gaining credentials, work experience, and linguistic skills across borders.

Thus, student mobility encompasses a range of transnational practices, including cross-border communication, repeated travel between countries, and the maintenance of political, cultural, and economic ties (Tyne & Ruspini, 2021; Köylü & Borràs, 2024). Students can be seen as “transnational agents” embedded in complex networks that shape what Raghuram (2013: 138) terms a “spatiality of knowledge.” While they may not initially identify as migrants, their mobility can evolve into more permanent migration, circular migration, or onward mobility (Valls-Figuera et al, 2023). According to Alves (2022), student mobility may result in three main outcomes: (a) returning to the country of origin; (b) moving to a third country for further study or work; or (c) staying abroad for an extended period. These transitions raise further questions about how integration and transnationalism interact. Do longer periods of study and residency weaken transnational ties, or do they transform them?

This interplay challenges the traditional binary between transnationalism and integration. Several studies suggest that these processes occur simultaneously: individuals may cultivate connections with both the host society and their country of origin at the same time (Faist 2000; Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004; Erdal & Oeppen 2013; Mügge 2016). Tyne (2019) further highlights how such experiences influence linguistic development and intercultural orientations. Existing SA research has often approached language learning through a lens of local integration, implicitly downplaying learners’ transnational embeddedness and suggesting that engagement with the host society rather than the maintenance of ties to homelands or co-nationals, is more conducive to language acquisition (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2017). From a migration-studies perspective, however, the transnational character of SA is not incidental but structurally inherent to mobility itself, which entails sustained cross-border social relations increasingly mediated through digital

communication. In this sense, applying a transnational perspective to the analysis of students' practices, and particularly their linguistic repertoires, appears not only appropriate but necessary within contemporary processes of internationalisation in higher education (Montgomery, 2010; Tyne & Ruspini, 2021).

Can this simultaneity be observed in former international students who become long-term migrants or who engage in continuous cross-border mobility for work, study, or language acquisition? To explore these thematic concerns, we present the following case-study.

## **The French pilot study**

### **Research questions**

The next section presents findings from a pilot case study conducted in Southwest France in 2018<sup>2</sup>. This qualitative research investigated how international students experience transnationalism and mobility, guided by the following research questions (Tyne & Ruspini 2021):

RQ1: How do transnational migration and mobility trends affect international students' cross-cultural interactions?

RQ2: To what extent do mobility institutions shape both real and virtual transnational configurations?

RQ3: How do students' intercultural orientations and sense of belonging evolve over time? Do they become circular migrants, returnees, or more settled?

### **Context, participants and instruments**

The study was conducted at the University of Perpignan Via Domitia (UPVD) in Southwest France and involved 18 international students aged between 20 and 38 of mixed gender. All participants were enrolled in master's programmes in French as a foreign language. They came from China, Kazakhstan, Algeria, and France, and had experienced individual academic mobility or participated in Erasmus programmes.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the main instrument for this study. They were conducted in French and English due to different language competences over one-week period. The interview guide covered themes such as migration experiences, social networks, transnational ties, and language acquisition. Participants were given the opportunity to have their personal data anonymised with pseudonyms, as well as having specific personal

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<sup>2</sup> The empirical data presented in this article was originally collected during a short-term scientific mission (STSM) conducted by the author at the University of Perpignan Via Domitia and funded within the 2016-2020 COST Action 15130 "Study Abroad Research in European Perspective (SAREP)" research network.

information omitted if they desired. The interviewees were also advised that they could leave the study or rescind their contribution at any point in the research process. The relevant narrative and data collected were saved on a password protected computer. Inductive data-driven and qualitative analysis provide the foundation for the next analysis.

## **Results**

The findings of this study are presented in three interrelated sections. The first examines international students' transnational practices and intercultural relationships; the second analyses the role of mobility institutions in facilitating or constraining transnational configurations; and the third explores the impact of the mobility experience on students' intercultural orientations and their sense of belonging over time.

### **Transnational practices and intercultural relationships of international students**

The analysis of interview data reveals that international students' transnational practices are predominantly mediated through local interactions, international travel, and digital technologies. Students reported frequent use of platforms such as social media, Skype, Messenger, and WhatsApp to maintain contact with people and institutions across borders. Among the Chinese students, several also engaged in language exchange or tutoring via digital platforms, teaching French to peers back in China.

Intercultural relationships developed primarily with fellow students, professors, language teachers, and mobility office staff at the host university. These relationships extended beyond the classroom and played an important role in shaping students' transnational experiences and linguistic development. Some interviewees also experienced "culture shock" in everyday life, particularly those from China, who recounted moments of adjustment and disorientation. However, these were often offset by positive intercultural exchanges, such as instances where French students supported their Chinese peers in navigating linguistic and cultural barriers.

Overall, SA experiences whether in France for international students or abroad for French students, broadened participants' linguistic repertoires, transnational engagement, and social networks. These experiences often went beyond the target language (French) to include other languages such as Chinese, Japanese, or Hindi. Importantly, while virtual tools did not replace physical mobility, they complemented it by facilitating ongoing transnational and linguistic exchanges.

### **Mobility institutions' effects on transnational configurations, both real and virtual**

Most participants acknowledged the critical role that institutional support played in enabling their SA experiences. However, perceptions of this support varied by nationality. While French and Chinese students generally described positive interactions with their institutions, Kazakh students reported difficulties, particularly with bureaucratic procedures and the lack of foreign language proficiency among mobility office staff. These obstacles often delayed paperwork and complicated the preparation process for mobility.

Interestingly, the study found that transnational configurations among students were more frequently the result of individual agency and informal networks than institutional initiatives. Most students maintained personal relationships across borders but had little or no involvement with migrant organisations, either in their home or host countries. This lack of institutional connection differentiates international students from other types of migrants, such as low-skilled or temporary labour migrants, who often rely heavily on ethnic or community-based networks for support (Boyd & Nowak 2012).

Moreover, for some students, particularly those from post-colonial contexts like Algeria, ethnic networks could be double-edged and thus act as 'traps' where power abuses can take place (Boyd & Nowak 2012). One Algerian student described being misled by a relative in Marseille, who diverted him from his intended educational path. After arriving in Perpignan, however, the student was able to regain autonomy and pursue his academic goals thanks to the support of locals. This example illustrates how informal networks can alternately hinder or enable transnational educational trajectories.

### **How do movements for SA affect intercultural relations and a person's sense of belonging over time?**

SA experiences significantly influenced students' cultural perspectives, linguistic ambitions, and professional goals. Several students expressed new desires to continue their mobility, including aspirations to teach French abroad or return to a previous host country. For instance, one French student expressed a strong wish to teach French in Japan, a goal inspired by their intercultural encounters during mobility.

These experiences often generated a lasting interest in further travel, language learning, and intercultural engagement. Many students expressed a desire to return to previous host locations, visit friends, or explore new destinations. However, a parallel tendency toward stability and long-term planning also emerged. Several participants stated their intention to return

to their home countries after completing their degrees, aiming to pursue careers in education or language instruction.

This dual orientation, i.e. openness to future mobility combined with an aspiration for professional grounding, illustrates the complex ways in which international students navigate transnational life paths. Even though they are aware of the competitive and uncertain nature of academic labour markets, many students continue to envision careers anchored in their home contexts. The experience of studying abroad thus functions both as a catalyst for transnational aspirations and as a point of reflection on the value of local belonging and professional continuity.

### **Discussion in a comparative perspective**

The lens of migrant transnationalism reveals a variety of practices that foster both social inclusion and mobility. Following Faist's (1999) framework, transnational spaces encompass not only physical locations but also the cross-border practices and ties that constitute everyday lived experiences. These social fields are dynamic and relational, allowing for the emergence of "localities" that are shaped by transnational connections. As previously discussed, a key question is whether the simultaneity of integration and transnationalism documented in other forms of migration, also applies to international students. Do former students who remain abroad or engage in ongoing mobility across countries experience both integration into host societies and sustained transnational engagement?

Findings from the author's earlier research in Southwest France (Tyne & Ruspini 2021) suggest that this simultaneity is indeed present. These results are reinforced by comparative data from a subsequent study involving Catalan-Spanish and Turkish participants (Ruspini, Borràs & Köylü 2023; Köylü & Borràs 2024; Köylü & Borràs 2025). Both studies highlight the complex coexistence of integration processes and transnational practices among students with varied cultural, linguistic, and migratory backgrounds.

The question of identity or sense of belonging also emerges as central. Previous research on Bulgarian migrants, for example, found that migration served as a catalyst for identity transformation. In these cases, individuals pursued a "better" identity through active social participation, often resulting for Bulgarian highly skilled migrants and international students in a stronger identification with Europe and a positive redefinition of self (Mihailov et al. 2017). Similarly, the French study revealed that both French L1 (native) and L2 (non-native) speakers developed a stronger sense of multicultural belonging following their SA experiences. Participants in the Catalan-Spanish and Turkish sample also reported an evolution toward more supranational forms of identity, often triggered by moments of cultural dis-

location or self-reflection during their time abroad (Ruspini, Borràs & Köylü 2023; Köylü & Borràs 2024; Köylü & Borràs 2025).

These findings raise further questions: Do conventional national or regional identities come into conflict with the transnational attachments formed during mobility? Or can they coexist? In the French sample, there was no evident tension between intercultural openness and local identity. On the contrary, students showed a growing enthusiasm for language learning and a positive disposition toward intercultural encounters. This openness complemented rather than competed with their attachment to local or regional identities. This was especially evident in the Catalan context, where the University of Perpignan Via Domitia is situated near the French-Spanish border in a region with a strong cross-border cultural identity. Here, international and local students' experiences of linguistic and cultural hybridity resonated with the regional context, reinforcing rather than undermining their sense of belonging.

In summary, the intercultural orientations expressed by students were often anchored in a desire to secure meaningful employment in their home countries. This is consistent with their reflections on the value of SA as a stepping stone for both personal and professional development. At the same time, the aspirations and trajectories of international students are shaped by structural factors including class and gender, which may differ significantly from those of the broader migrant population (Liu-Farrer 2022). It is important to emphasize the contextual nature of these findings. The conclusions presented here are drawn from a small qualitative sample of students engaged in academic mobility in Southwest France. While the data offer valuable insights into the motivations and evolving identities of mobile students, they cannot be generalized to the wide variety of international student experiences worldwide. Nonetheless, this pilot study demonstrates the analytical value of adopting a transnational perspective to investigate student mobility and its potential long-term implications.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined contemporary transformations in international migration and mobility through the analytical triangulation of migration-mobility, transnationalism, and international student trajectories. It has shown that current forms of human movement can no longer be adequately captured through the traditional dichotomy between permanent and temporary migration. Instead, they are increasingly characterised by fluid, multi-directional, and often reversible mobility patterns, within which international students emerge as a particularly illustrative case.

A first key insight concerns the blurring of boundaries between migration and mobility. The analysis demonstrates that international students occupy an intermediate and dynamic position: while formally classified as temporary movers, their trajectories frequently evolve into longer-term, circular, or onward migration pathways. This challenges conventional statistical and policy categories, which tend to overlook temporary and educational mobility despite its growing quantitative and qualitative significance in global migration systems.

Second, the article highlights the analytical value of a transnational perspective in capturing the lived realities of student mobility. The empirical findings show that international students are embedded in transnational social fields that combine physical movement with digitally mediated connections. These practices do not substitute for mobility but rather extend it, enabling continuous cross-border engagement. Importantly, the study provides evidence that transnationalism and integration are not mutually exclusive processes: students simultaneously develop local attachments in the host society while maintaining and often transforming ties to their countries of origin.

Third, the findings underscore the central role of individual agency in shaping mobility trajectories. While institutional frameworks such as university mobility offices facilitate access to SA, transnational practices are largely driven by students' own networks, aspirations, and strategies. These trajectories are neither linear nor predetermined; instead, they reflect a combination of opportunity structures and personal projects, often resulting in hybrid outcomes such as "permanently temporary" mobility or stepwise migration.

Finally, the article contributes to ongoing debates on inequality and stratification in global mobility. Although international students are often positioned as relatively privileged compared to other migrant groups, the analysis reveals a more differentiated picture. Access to and experiences of mobility remain shaped by structural factors such as class, nationality, and institutional support, highlighting the need to move beyond simplified distinctions between "elite" and "vulnerable" migrants.

Taken together, these insights suggest that international student mobility should be understood not as a marginal or temporary phenomenon, but as a central component of contemporary migration systems. Adopting a transnational and process-oriented perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how mobility unfolds across the life course and across spaces. Future research would benefit from expanding this approach through multi-sited, comparative, and intersectional designs capable of capturing the diversity of student experiences and their long-term implications for migration, labour markets, and social inequalities.

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