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International Student Mobility to Canada and New Zealand: “Edugration” or “Transience”?

Mobilité des étudiants internationaux vers le Canada et la Nouvelle-Zélande : « édugration » ou « expérience transitoire » ?

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Pluralizing Educational Mobilities: Towards a More Equitable and
Inclusive Discourse

Pluralisation des mobilités éducatives : vers un discours plus
équitable et plus inclusif

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Article abstract

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**Mobilité des étudiants internationaux vers le Canada et la Nouvelle-Zélande :
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Abstract:

Policy makers in some key Western international education hubs assume that international student mobility (ISM) is based on aspirations for permanent migration, particularly if those students come from the Global South. The concept of *edugration*—an amalgam of education and immigration—has become influential in both policy and research. This paper examines student motivations for ISM in Canada and New Zealand using a mixed methods approach of online surveys and focus group interviews, collecting data from 396 international student participants (Canada: $n = 244$; New Zealand: $n = 152$). The results show a nuanced picture, highlighting that many students view international study as a transient experience rather than one that facilitates permanent migration. The paper also discusses the extent to which a desire to attract potential migrants is reflected in policies related to ISM in the two countries, and the potential implications of the findings for these policies.

Résumé :

Les décideurs politiques de certains grands centres d'éducation internationale occidentaux partent du principe que la mobilité internationale des étudiants (MIE) est fondée sur des aspirations à la migration permanente, en particulier si ces étudiants viennent des pays du Sud global. Le concept « d'éducation » – un amalgame d'éducation et d'immigration – est devenu influent à la fois dans la politique et dans la recherche. Cet article examine les motivations des étudiants quant à la MIE vers le Canada et la Nouvelle-Zélande en utilisant une approche mixte d'enquêtes en ligne et d'entrevues avec des groupes de discussion, recueillant des données auprès de 396 participants étudiants internationaux (Canada : $n = 244$; Nouvelle-Zélande : $n = 152$). Les résultats font ressortir une image nuancée, soulignant que de nombreux étudiants envisagent les études internationales comme étant une expérience transitoire plutôt que comme un moyen de faciliter la migration permanente. Cet article examine également dans quelle mesure le désir d'attirer des migrants potentiels se reflète dans les politiques liées à la MIE dans les deux pays, et les implications potentielles des résultats pour ces politiques.

Keywords: international student mobility, ISM, Canada, New Zealand, edugration, migration, transience

Mots-clés : mobilité internationale des étudiants, MIE, Canada, Nouvelle-Zélande, éducation, migration, expérience transitoire

Introduction

According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2019), there are over 5.3 million students pursuing university education outside their home country. Of that, 4.4 million international students (or 83% overall) were enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Flows of international students from developing to developed countries have reached historic highs, and appears to be on the increase. One example is Canada, where 41% of student visas issued in 2022 went to Indian nationals, a four-fold increase since 2019 (Packer, 2023). These

relentless flows of students from developing to developed countries are problematic because they undermine the pluralization of educational mobility. Especially when a small group of OECD countries in the educational “Anglosphere” (United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) tends to treat international student mobility (ISM) as an oligopolistic competition for “market share.” Policymakers in these countries curate policies and market their HEIs internationally, because ISM represents a cost recovery mechanism for their financially struggling higher education sectors, plus international students have the potential to fill shortages in domestic labour markets and become ideal-type citizens. In effect, these ISM flows manifest a new kind of colonialism. However, before one can adequately critique this new colonialism on normative or ethical grounds, we must try to explain the phenomenon, empirically. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate one of the major reasons put forward for this competition for ISM—in order to attract potential migrants. As such, our research has been guided by the following overarching questions:

1. What factors do international students consider when they decide to study abroad, and when they make choices about international study destinations?
2. To what extent is migration a motivating factor for international study? How can we understand the intentions of international students who express something other than permanent migration as their primary motivation for study?

Furthermore, we explore the extent to which the desire to attract potential migrants is reflected in policies related to ISM in host countries, and discuss the potential implications of our findings for these policies. If it turns out that immigration opportunities are a primary motivator for international student mobility, then policymakers are simply meeting a (market) need by curating their policies accordingly. If, however, international students are motivated by things other than the possibility of permanent residence in a destination country, then ISM need not inevitably result in some of the drawbacks of the new colonialism, such as permanent brain drain.

Employing a comparative case study methodology, our research investigates the interactive effects between international student choices, and the public policies deployed within the postsecondary sectors of Canada and New Zealand.¹ By gathering data from international students, our evidence reveals novel findings. Unsurprisingly, we found that international students evaluate more than just education offerings in destination countries, they also investigate things like visa regulations and labour market opportunities. However, we also found that international students are strongly attracted by nonpecuniary intangibles in a destination country—such as safe and welcoming opportunities to learn a new culture—as much or more than economic opportunities. Most importantly, our data from Canada and New Zealand suggest that a significant proportion of international students do not intend to migrate permanently, but rather, fall into a new category of migratory *transience* where they intend to stay beyond a credential yet not necessarily settle permanently. These international students see study abroad as a stepping stone to further mobility opportunities, possibly in other destinations (including their home country). Taken together, these findings present a picture of international students that differs from many of the assumptions made by policymakers in Canada and New Zealand. They suggest that international students are less “neoliberal” and instrumental in their decisions to study abroad, perhaps more cosmopolitan than assumed, as well as more transient regarding medium-term life plans. As such, student motivations for international mobility are perhaps more plural than assumed by policymakers in places like Canada and New Zealand.

¹ This paper specifically looks at public universities for consistency in cohorts across the country cases.

Literature Review

ISM is an area of research that emerged from studies on higher education internationalization, in which student mobility is subsumed within the various internationalization activities of HEIs. As the internationalization literature relates to ISM, it is more descriptive than explanatory. A parallel literature assesses student mobility as a phenomenon that can be understood using the logics of neoclassic economics—that is, determined by supply and demand. Within this literature, there are distinct perspectives to why ISM is occurring (and increasing). Some emphasize the demand side (students or their families have various motivations for demanding education services), others emphasize the supply side (how HEIs or governments supply education services), and some perspectives try to deal with both. The section below offers a very brief overview of two major theoretical perspectives on ISM: the migration perspective and human capital theory.² Most relevant to our research questions are explanations that examine the demand side of ISM, and which account for student agency. However, there remains a conceptual gap regarding how time horizons have been projected onto the decision-making of international students, with the literature not fully capturing how this is accounted for by “students-as-agents”.

The migration perspective treats ISM as a subset of high-skilled migration. Building on neoclassical models of migration, this perspective fundamentally assumes that students (or their families) are rational decision-makers capable of making relatively well-informed mobility decisions that could lead to migration opportunities.³ The migration perspective analytically separates variables into two sets of factors, supply side and demand side, as potential drivers of ISM. Most early research (from the 1970s until the 2010s) focused on the demand side, examining the explanations offered by students for engaging in international study, and fostering choice-based explanations of student mobility (Findlay et al., 2017; Kim & Sondhi, 2019). Prominent within the demand side literature has been an evaluation of various “push-pull” factors that influence decision-making. “Push” factors push migrants (or students) to leave their home country, while “pull” factors draw students to particular destination countries. Major push factors include economic decline or stagnation; political instability; and poor educational prospects due to lack of quality, capacity, or access. Major pull factors include professional development opportunities; education quality or opportunity in the destination country; employment prospects; higher wages and/or better work conditions; higher standard of living; migration prospects; existing social networks; as well as nonpecuniary reasons like language learning or experiencing a culture foreign to their own. There are also pull factors that can act as a barrier or friction on mobility, such as economic costs involved in travel and study abroad; social costs emerging from insecurity or racial discrimination; geographic distance; lack of language proficiency; and lack of available information on destination. Numerous empirical studies have tested the importance of these demand-side variables, and the overall takeaway is that pull factors typically outweigh push factors, with the strongest pull factor being opportunities for professional development, including foreign work experience (Branco Oliveira & Soares, 2016; Findlay, 2011; Massey & Burrow, 2012; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Nghia, 2019; Worae & Edgerton, 2023). Migration-related ISM research has shifted during the last decade to focus more on supply-side factors. At its broadest, this perspective recognizes that educational, social and economic structures shape the context within which mobility decisions are made, such as the effects of geopolitics on migratory or

² A third approach, the new mobilities paradigm, suggests that ISM is a kind of consumption good (i.e., a rite of passage or personal adventure). Aside of highlighting how students can be mobile for nonpecuniary reasons, this approach is less useful for explaining the ISM flows we examine here.

³ Behavioral economics has challenged some of these assumptions, such as complete information and even rationality.

mobility patterns. Ultimately, however, the supply-side factors of greatest utility for this research are the public policies developed in destination countries by governments and governing bodies. A number of studies examined how education and immigration policies are mechanisms used by governments to strategically improve the supply of international students coming to their HEIs, and thereby also a means to find potentially “ideal” candidates for residency and citizenship (Beech, 2018; Hawthorne, 2011, 2012; Kim & Sondhi, 2019; Scott et al., 2015; Trilokekar & El Masri, 2019). While the nexus where education meets immigration is further elaborated below (in the Conceptual Framework section), here it suffices to say that supply-side policies certainly matter for ISM. However, we question the time horizons projected by these models—and by policymakers themselves. Do significant numbers of international students consider permanent migration opportunities when making mobility decisions? In short, these policies might exist in Anglophone destination countries (such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), but analysts and policymakers could overvalue their significance in the decision-making calculus of international students.

Human capital theory suggests that “ISM can be seen as a career-enhancing investment—a rational strategy in order to better compete in the domestic labour market of the origin country following return ‘home’” (King & Sondhi, 2018, p. 178). As such, this theory suggests that ISM is fundamentally about educational quality rather than migratory or employment opportunities.⁴ The human capital perspective evaluates macro-level determinants on the demand side, such as quality of overseas education, weighed against the deterrent effect of costs of living or tuition. Yet what is particularly useful about the human capital perspective are theories regarding the supply side of ISM, such as the ideas behind higher education internationalization policies. Although material interests and institutional legacies are important, ideology seems especially influential when tracing education policy trajectories over the medium-to-long term. The human capital perspective suggests that policymakers adhere to particular policy paradigms that have different conceptions of human capital, and which change over time. Prior to the 1980s, many HEIs and governments had a liberal-developmental view of ISM: it was about inviting the best and brightest—or sometimes merely the wealthiest and most powerful—from the Global South to universities in the Global North, in order to paternalistically facilitate the development of a liberal world order. Towards the end of the 20th century, however, there was a paradigm shift in many Anglosphere countries, towards neoliberalism and quasi-marketization. Today, “to understand international student flows it is necessary to think of education as a product that is both marketed and marketized” (Findlay et al., 2017, p. 140). To sum up, one of the assets of the human capital perspective is the extensive treatment of the supply side of student mobility: it takes seriously how policymakers shape the international education landscape. However, its primary detriment is an assumption that the demand side of ISM is fundamentally about short term “capitalization”—students making choices to study abroad for an immediate mobility dividend rather than considering long-term life opportunities. In other words, it assumes that ISM is a temporary phenomenon and that time horizons are quite short—perhaps too short to accurately reflect the actual decision-making calculus of international students or their families.

Conceptual Framework

What is missing from this ISM literature is a conceptual framework that can do three things simultaneously: analytically bridge the supply and demand factors which have the most influence

⁴ Related to this is a class-based perspective which applies Pierre Bourdieu’s well-known “forms of capital” as an analytical tool for understanding ISM. However, we look beyond elite demand, and try to incorporate the supply side of ISM.

on international education, account for varied time horizons in the decision-making processes of international students, and treat students as (boundedly rational) agents who decide their own life course.⁵ The section below begins to construct just such a conceptual framework, using concepts from comparative education and educational sociology. It is worth noting that the empirics in this paper do not rigorously test this conceptual framework, but rather, they are meant to shed light on the concepts and see how they might apply in the real world (that is, theory-building rather than theory-testing).

Edugration

We use the concept of *edugration* (an amalgam of education and immigration) in order to understand how governments in the Global North have engaged in a new competition for global talent, and how international students become implicated in these schemes vis-à-vis the presumption that they use onshore international education as a pathway for settlement. Many countries—and especially settler-colonial countries within the educational Anglosphere—have been competing for immigrants who can integrate into societies and labour markets relatively seamlessly. Until recently, governments engaged in a two-step “probationary” immigration process: recruit temporary foreign workers, and then once they are integrated into domestic labour markets, selectively retain some of them for permanent residency and citizenship (Crossman et al., 2020). During the 21st century, there has simultaneously been a global race for international students. In this competition for greater market share of ISM, governments observed that international students tended to be young, highly skilled (or able to acquire necessary skills), as well as language proficient. They appeared to require comparatively little integration support—governments could effectively “outsource” the integration process to HEIs and the international students themselves (Hawthorne, 2012; Trilokekar & El Masri, 2019). Thus, the advent of a three-step process through which international students can be primed for—and filtered out of—permanent residency and citizenship. Step one involves admission to (and eventually graduation from) an HEI. Step two involves competing on the domestic labour market for a limited time, vis-à-vis postgraduation work permits (and increasingly, work permits during study). Step three involves applying to remain as permanent residents and citizens. Lisa Brunner (2022, 2023) identified this strategic move towards a three-step process of selecting and cultivating students to become permanent migrants as “edugration.” Certainly, there are dire normative implications if edugration is becoming a deliberate policy strategy. Aside of outsourcing immigrant integration, it has also been misrepresented as a “triple-win”: students obtain a quality education and a desirable citizenship; the HEIs obtain revenues, cultural diversity and even a somewhat captive labour force; and the destination country obtains skilled human capital, population growth and soft power. However, this neglects the broader problems produced by edugration, such as a replication of privilege and power, as well as brain drain. It also ignores that many students get “filtered out” by edugration and are unable to achieve the promise of permanent residency. In terms of ethics, edugration seems less a “triple-win” and more a wicked problem (that is, elusive, complex, and resistant to simple solutions) (Brunner, 2022).

To operationalize the concept of edugration, we assessed whether it was an active strategy deployed by governments, rather than a kind of latent strategy used by students but not necessarily intended by governments. We looked for explicit evidence of edugration narratives in public policies constructed by governments in New Zealand and Canada. Moreover, if significant

⁵ Tran and Vu (2018, p. 170) noted “a critical lack of empirical work that examines ... agency.”

numbers of international students are *not* motivated by immigration opportunities (in the way that edugration assumes), then we must consider what students themselves say is driving demand for international education. This is where the concept of *transience* becomes useful.

Transience

Transience is a concept developed by Catherine Gomes that has been used to decipher certain types of transnational migration. Transience suggests that transnational migrants deliberately seek temporary opportunities to build human capital (i.e., skills) and cultural capital (i.e., networks) which can then facilitate further transnational migratory experiences. Through the course of her research, Gomes observed that migrations were becoming more transient and complex, and that transnational migrants were becoming increasingly sophisticated. Transience “challenges what we understand about cross border migration and should be used as a method in comprehending the complexities, nuances, and ecologies emerging from these migration experiences” (Gomes, 2019, p. 225). Transience can be applied to ISM in order to explain significant elements of the demand side for international education. For many international students, the goal is not permanence via education but rather the flexibility to choose their own journeys and life courses depending on opportunities and (changing) personal and professional circumstances. In other words, international students are actively choosing transience not as a disruptor of their life course but rather one that enhances it. For instance, when analyzing international students and skilled temporary migrants in Singapore, Gomes observed that these actors

do not view their futures as absent, nor do they consider uncertainty in their future as a negative [but i]nstead, uncertain futures mean opportunity ... because transient migrants who are in this temporary transnational mobility space consider themselves to be highly skilled with transferrable skills and who are able to adapt to any country where they wish to be hosted. (Gomes, 2019, p. 226)

For many international students, transience might be an explicit objective, not a default fallback position.

Operationalizing transience involves explicitly asking international students if temporariness is part of their decision calculus. Gomes (2021) argued for “transience as method,” which suggests that migration studies (and ISM) should explicitly inquire about and evaluate disruptions in the migration experience. Inquiring with international students about the time horizons and temporariness of their life plans is a meaningful way to appreciate the salience of the concept of transience.

Research Design

Building new conceptual frameworks rarely involves methods that render highly conclusive findings that lead to strong causal inferences (or outright proofs). The logic of theory building suggests that one should look for a given concept to empirically exist anywhere, before testing to see if that concept has a particular effect somewhere. Therefore, the goal of our study was to conduct “straw-in-the-wind” tests for the concepts of edugration and transience, in order to see if they had any salience for ISM in the educational Anglosphere. A “straw-in-the-wind” test implies that one looks for meaningful evidence of a concept or theory, without trying to infer the degree to which the concept or theory is broadly representative or generalizable (Mahoney, 2012).

In light of this, we selected two country cases where edugration was likely to be manifest: Canada and New Zealand. These country cases were comparable inasmuch as they are both settler-colonial countries with a history of high rates of skilled migration. They are also both part of the

educational Anglosphere which has attracted a disproportionately high flow of international students. We then used three methods to gather data on the concepts. The first method entailed analyzing public-facing policy documents, as produced by governments in Canada and New Zealand. These documents were evaluated using thematic discourse analysis at a latent level (i.e., assessing the underlying assumptions and ideas which inform the semantic content of the texts). This process began with the generation and selection of thematic codes followed by analysis of thematic prevalence across an entire document and within coding instances (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second method entailed anonymous (online) surveys of international students at a single university in each country, with convenience sampling as the means to generate survey respondents.⁶ The surveys were identical across cases, and asked a series of close-ended quantitatively scored questions as well as open-ended text-field questions. The surveys were conducted from January to March 2021, yielding 152 responses from the university in New Zealand and 244 responses from the university in Canada. The final method involved focus group interviews from amongst self-selected survey respondents. These semi-structured group interviews were conducted in March and April 2021, and utilized very similar scripts across cases. The Canadian focus groups yielded 11 interviewees, while the New Zealand focus groups yielded 12 interviewees. Again, the interview transcripts were evaluated using applied thematic analysis which coded for things like permanent residence and transience. The results of this research are elaborated below.

Findings: Edugration Policy Context

There is empirical evidence that edugration has been a pathway to residency in New Zealand and Canada. In New Zealand, a 2011 study of engineers demonstrated that skilled migrants who obtained their credentials onshore increased from 66% in 2005 to 73% in 2009. Whether or not this was an active strategy by the government, Immigration New Zealand accepted more applicants that qualified through a study-work-migration pathway (Hawthorne, 2011). Likewise for Canada, there is evidence that the edugration pathway has become a viable opportunity, with the proportion of successful permanent residency applicants relative to new international students increasing each year between 2010 and 2015 (see Kim & Kwak, 2019). The question remains whether state actors supply international education services as a deliberate strategy for the (selective) recruitment of skilled immigrants.

While there were indications from as early as the 1990s, it was during the 2010s that edugration began to fully materialize in policies championed by the federal and provincial governments of Canada. With education being a provincial jurisdiction, the interprovincial Council for Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) were the first to explicitly assert an objective to increase the number of international students choosing to remain in Canada (CMEC, 2011, pp. 5–6). However, the provinces recognized that immigration was primarily a federal jurisdiction, so they sought to “work within existing arrangements ... which may include working with [Citizenship and Immigration Canada], to ensure that annual immigration-level planning allows room for students who wish to remain permanently in Canada” (CMEC, 2011, p. 23). By 2014, the federal government also indicated that one of their performance measures would be to “[i]ncrease the number of international students choosing to remain in Canada as permanent residents after graduation” (Government of Canada, 2014, p. 17). This edugration policy narrative

⁶ Given the logic of a “straw-in-the-wind” test, the small sample size is appropriate. For access to survey and interview scripts, please contact the authors of this paper.

was reinforced by the federal government's 2019 internationalization strategy, which suggested that

[i]nternational students make excellent candidates for permanent residency: they are relatively young, are proficient in at least one official language, have Canadian educational qualifications and can help address this country's current and pending labour market needs, particularly for highly skilled workers. (Government of Canada, 2019, p. 5)

Despite this edugration narrative, evidence suggests that the key to permanent residency in Canada is employment, more so than study: the transition rate to permanent residency for those on temporary worker visas has been 46%, and amongst holders of student visas it has remained below 30% (Statistics Canada, 2021, p. 9). Although edugration has been heralded as a new immigration strategy by provincial and federal governments, it is a strategy that also has high rates of selectivity and attrition.

Around the same time, an edugration policy narrative emerged in New Zealand. In 2011, the New Zealand government recognized that international students could be “a key pool of potential migrants, who can more easily adapt to local societies and opportunities than people with no previous in-country experience” (New Zealand Government, 2011, p. 5). Moreover, it predicted an ongoing need for these skilled migrants and set a specific goal to “increase the transition rate from study to residence for international students with bachelors level qualifications and above” (New Zealand Government, 2011, p. 7). The narrative was somewhat short-lived, however. By 2018, the New Zealand International Education Strategy (2018–2030) continued to emphasize the economic value of international students, but gone was any goal to increase the transition rate from study to residence.

While the possibility of students remaining after their studies was maintained, the main goal was to “ensure that students who wish to remain in New Zealand are appropriately skilled and qualified” (Education New Zealand, 2018, p. 13). This goal was also reflected in changes to New Zealand's post-study work visa which reduced the maximum duration for graduates at sub-degree level and increased it for those at degree level (New Zealand Government, 2018). On the premise that “the ability to offer post-study work rights is an important tool for marketing New Zealand's international education offering to prospective students,” the intention was to maintain New Zealand's competitiveness as a study destination, while at the same time ensuring those students who did remain were suitably skilled by linking more generous rights to higher level qualifications (Office of the Minister of Immigration, 2018, p. 7). In 2022, a refreshed International Education Strategy continued the same theme, noting that “most students return home at the conclusion of their studies. Those wanting to stay longer in New Zealand must have the skills and qualifications we need” (Education New Zealand, 2022, p. 24). The release of the refreshed strategy was predated by the announcement of changes that further tightened post-study work visa settings (New Zealand Government, 2022). The language accompanying this announcement was also hardened, exemplified by this statement by then Minister of Education, Chris Hipkins: “changes we're announcing today seek to attract students to New Zealand to learn, while also shutting the backdoor route to residency” (Education New Zealand, 2022). The discourse in New Zealand around ISM and edugration had clearly changed since 2018—from a strategy that refers positively to international students as a potential source of migrants (with targets that reflect this) to a discourse that is more neutral in tone and contains no such objectives. The underlying philosophy appears to be that while post-study work rights remain important to attract international students, the fact that some of these students may go on to become residents is a necessary

consequence, rather than something that is actively sought; instead, the priority is to ensure that those who take this path are suitably skilled.

The policy narratives put forth by governments in Canada and New Zealand assumed that permanent migration had been a strong motivating factor for ISM. Given the changing policy contexts in each country, we might thus anticipate that New Zealand's shift away from edugration as an active strategy had a dampening effect on the migratory motivations of recently arrived international students, or else influenced the types of students selecting New Zealand as a study destination. International students coming to New Zealand would no longer assume that a pathway from study to residence was tenable, whereas international students coming to Canada would still be motivated by permanent migration opportunities (and thus express this motivation in survey responses). Instead, we found no significant difference in the motivations of recently arrived international students. In the cases we examined, international students expressed permanent migration as a motivation for studying in Canada and New Zealand to the same degree. These findings are elaborated below.

Findings: Student Surveys and Focus Groups

The data is based on survey responses of 244 international students from an undergraduate university in Canada, and 152 international students from an undergraduate university in New Zealand (contact the authors for more information on demographic profile).

Survey Responses: Push Factors

Push factors describe the motives that predispose an individual to migrate in the first place; they explain the desire to move from one place to another. In the survey, students were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 7 how important six different push factors were in their decision to study in Canada or New Zealand, with 1 meaning not at all important and 7 meaning very important.

In each country, the order in which these six factors ranked based on both mean score and the percentage of students who ranked them as highly important (either 6 or 7) was the same. The highest ranked push factor, by some margin in both countries, was the desire to experience or learn about a foreign culture. The next highest ranked push factor in both countries was the perception that foreign universities have a better reputation.

Figure 1*Most Important Push Factors—Canada (As Ranked on a Scale of 1–7)*

Factors	Rank	Mean score	% ranked highly important (6–7)
Desire to experience or learn about a foreign culture	1	6.2	78%
Perception that foreign universities have a better reputation	2	5.4	56%
Perception of fewer or lower quality economic/employment opportunities in home country	3	5.2	51%
Political instability or uncertainty in home country	4	5.1	49%
Perception of lower quality education or lack of educational choices in home country	5	4.4	35%
Problems getting into a domestic higher education institution	6	4.2	32%

Figure 2*Most Important Push Factors—New Zealand (As Ranked on a Scale of 1–7)*

Factors	Rank	Mean score	% ranked highly important (6–7)
Desire to experience or learn about a foreign culture	1	5.5	57%
Perception that foreign universities have a better reputation	2	4.3	32%
Perception of fewer or lower quality economic/employment opportunities in home country	3	3.9	28%
Political instability or uncertainty in home country	4	3.7	26%
Perception of lower quality education or lack of educational choices in home country	5	3.4	18%
Problems getting into a domestic higher education institution	6	3.4	17%

Although there was a (consistent) difference in mean scores across the two destinations, there was remarkable consistency in the students' rankings of reasons to become mobile, despite the samples being quite different in terms of sending countries. The fact that nonpecuniary reasons ranked first overall in both cases is an early indicator that international students—in this sample at any rate—are less instrumental (and neoliberal) regarding their mobility decisions than perhaps assumed.

Survey Responses: Pull Factors

Pull factors describe the features that attract an individual to a particular place; they are the factors that explain his or her choice of destination. In the survey, students were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 7 how important 20 different pull factors were in their decision to study in Canada or

New Zealand, with 1 meaning not at all important and 7 meaning very important. In both countries, the top two pull factors were the perception that they are (1) welcoming, and (2) safe places for international students, albeit with a different order in terms of which of these ranked first and which ranked second in each country. Beyond this, there was some variance between the two countries, with academic reputation appearing to be particularly influential in terms of why students choose Canada, while political stability was the next highest ranked factor in New Zealand.

Figure 3

Most Important Pull Factors—Canada (As Ranked on a Scale of 1–7)

Factors	Rank	Mean score	% ranked highly important (6–7)
Perception that Canada is a welcoming place for international students	1	6.3	84%
Perception that Canada is a safe place for international students	2	6.2	80%
The reputation of Canadian higher education generally	3	5.9	71%
The reputation of institution specifically	4	5.8	70%
Rules and regulations for visas after studies are over	5	5.8	65%
Desire to permanently emigrate from home country to Canada	13	5.1	51%

Figure 4

Most Important Pull Factors—New Zealand (As Ranked on a Scale of 1–7)

Factors	Rank	Mean score	% ranked highly important (6–7)
Perception that New Zealand is a safe place for international students	1	5.6	64%
Perception that New Zealand is a welcoming place for international students	2	5.5	59%
Political stability in New Zealand	3	5.1	48%
Rules and regulations for visas after studies are over	4	5.0	43%
A specific course, program or degree available at institution	5	4.9	40%
Desire to permanently emigrate from home country to New Zealand	9	4.4	31%

Yet again, our survey data was remarkably consistent across countries, with nonpecuniary factors (i.e., perceptions of safety and welcome) ranking highest amongst these students when considering destination countries. This reinforces our findings from the push factors, and further suggests that

many international students look for intangible lifestyle benefits more so than other (more economic) pull factors.

However, the possibility to remain in the country after students have finished their studies also ranked highly in both countries. Specifically, the rules and regulations for getting post-study visas were the fifth highest ranked pull factor in Canada, and fourth highest in New Zealand. One thing to note is that valuing the rules and regulations for getting post-study visas in a country is not synonymous with a desire to permanently migrate to that country, with a significantly greater proportion of students in both countries attaching high importance to the former than the latter as factors influencing their decision. In Canada, a desire to permanently migrate there was only the 13th highest ranked pull factor. In New Zealand, it was the 9th highest ranked pull factor. The notion that valuing the rules and regulations for getting post-study visas and a desire to permanently migrate to the host country are not one and the same thing was further illustrated by the focus group data. For example, this student noted that the main reason she chose New Zealand was its post-study work visa policy, despite having no set intention to remain here permanently:

To be honest, I come to New Zealand because New Zealand offers quite a long period open work visa, like three years for master's students so, for me I have work experience before in China and then I want to find more opportunities for my life, maybe, so I came here and initially I plan that after I finished my master degree I would like to work here.

The desire to remain in the host country for a period upon graduation to gain work experience, with no clear plan to remain in the longer term, was a common theme in the New Zealand focus group data, one that is expanded on in the next section exploring students' post-study intentions.

Post-Study Intentions

When asked about their current post-study intentions if all goes to plan, a similar proportion of respondents in both countries answered that it was to remain in their host country as a permanent resident (35% in Canada; 33% in New Zealand).

Figure 5

Post-Study Intentions in Canada and New Zealand at Time of Survey

Intention	Canada	New Zealand
To complete current courses or credential and then return to home country	12%	14%
To complete credential and then investigate opportunities for further education or employment away from home country, without yet considering permanent migration to host country	53%	53%
To remain in host country as a permanent resident (i.e., to migrate)	35%	33%

The greatest proportion of students, 53% in each country, answered that they wanted to complete their degree, then investigate opportunities for further education or employment away from their home country, without yet considering permanent migration to their host country. This is the very definition of transience. The New Zealand focus group data helped to illuminate the thought processes of this group of students, with the largest group involved in the focus groups (5/12) having no set long-term intentions. This group included three students who said that gaining work experience in New Zealand was seen as an important extension of their education experience, after

which they would look to go where the best opportunities were, whether in their host country, home country, or a third country. This attitude was typified by the following statement by one student:

I'm not sure that I'm going to stay in New Zealand forever ... I probably must get a job first and gain some work experience ... for like three or four years, and with this experience and my degree, I can go anywhere I want. Maybe go back to China, maybe somewhere else. I do not want to limit myself like I would stay in New Zealand forever.

These students were open to the possibility of remaining longer term, but this was just one of multiple possibilities, and a decision for a later date. As one student noted, "getting [permanent residence] is just a bonus for me, I have not started to consider that. I think maybe after 3 or 5 years working here, I probably will start considering [permanent residency] here." They were also open to going elsewhere, exemplified by this statement: "I would say whoever gives me the work, I will just go."

The Canadian focus group data provided less insight into the thought processes of students with no set long-term intentions. However, it did provide greater insight into a very different category of students, those with the clear intention to remain long term, with the largest group involved in the Canadian focus groups (7/11) belonging to this group. For most of these students, a desire to permanently migrate was an important motivation for study abroad in the first place. For one student, this was synonymous with a desire to permanently migrate to Canada, but the others decided on Canada after considering other options. Policies for permanent residence (from student status) were an important consideration for them. For example, one student ultimately decided on Canada over Australia because of the existence of a clear pathway to residency: "I have briefly looked at Australia and ... [a]ctually, there's not such a pathway for international students to apply for [permanent residency] in Australia." Similarly, another student said that the main reason they chose Canada over elsewhere is because "they're giving ... students who are completing their studies permanent residency." These students were aware of the relevant policies. However, for a third, their decision came down to a perception that the pathway to residence was easier in Canada, rather than actual knowledge: "I was also not aware of the policies that would affect my status in Canada. But ... I feel like the whole immigration process is a little bit more open than the U.S. So that's why I decided [on] Canada."

While the Canadian focus group data highlighted a distinct category of students who are set on permanently migrating to their host country, it is important to note that some students who intend to remain long term can still be open to the possibility of changing direction. For example, one student involved in the New Zealand focus groups said, "I want to migrate to New Zealand but [it's] not that strong. I think finding a job in New Zealand is okay but coming back to China is also okay." One also noted that permanent residence "does not mean they will stay here forever." The focus group data illustrated that intentions are not static; they can change over the course of a study experience. Some students who started their studies with the intention to remain in their host country, no longer intended this by the time the focus groups took place. Similarly, some students who had no set intention to remain, ended up deciding they would like to stay. For example, this student said, "I started enjoying New Zealand, then I feel like, wow, it's a really good country, I should stay here. So, I changed my mind." She added, "I didn't think that much about immigration or working eligibility when I came to New Zealand. Only after I graduated and then started thinking about my career and life, I started to look at the immigration website."

Discussion and Conclusion

As illustrated by focus group data from the Canadian university, permanent migration via an educational pathway is an important motivator for some students who decide to become internationally mobile. Yet survey data from both cases demonstrates that a numerically larger proportion of students were motivated to study internationally for reasons other than migration or permanent residence. The desire for a more transient study/work experience seems to better account for the expressed motivations of many international students themselves, at least within this limited sample. As such, both edugration and transience pass our “straw-in-the-wind” test: they exist as useful analytical concepts for the study of international student mobility. Transience can help us to better understand the aspirations and decision-making processes of international students, moving beyond the conventional understanding of motivations for ISM. This conceptual broadening of the study of ISM can also account for the empirical reality that many international students will amend their aspirations for unforeseen professional, personal, and even environmental impacts (such as the COVID-19 pandemic). However, we must take care not to overstate our conclusions. More research is needed to expand the sample size and data sets in Canada, New Zealand, and beyond, in order to draw more generalizable conclusions. Furthermore, we must be modest about our conclusions even for this small sample. It is still too early to tell if recent changes to New Zealand’s edugration narrative has had an impact on student motivations. Furthermore, Canada’s edugration strategy seemed to shift in early 2024. Marc Miller, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, announced a temporary intake cap that would reduce by 35% the number of new international student permits (compared to 2023 numbers), and other measures to regulate intake of international students. These new policies will temporarily reduce inbound ISM to Canada, and potentially affect the motivations of future international students in their choice of destination country. Notwithstanding, the edugration narrative within these policies has not changed—international students remain welcome and valued as potential migrants—yet there also appears to be a limit to edugration as a primary motivator for ISM: even if Canada still pursues this as an active strategy, it is likely to appeal to only some who are considering international study.

Inasmuch as both edugration and transience seem to be salient concepts for explaining elements of ISM, there appears to be some degree of mismatch between governmental policies and the motivations of students themselves. Governmental policies that promote edugration have limited appeal amongst a majority of students (in this sample) who prefer transient mobility. Focusing more on such transient opportunities could maintain the attractiveness of Canada and New Zealand as study destinations and mitigate the least ethical aspects of an edugration agenda, such as permanent brain drain from developing countries and privatizing immigrant integration. Given that permanent migration appears to be less of a motivation than traditionally thought and many students are open to multiple possibilities after graduation, and potentially a period of work in the host country, governments in countries like Canada and New Zealand could also work more closely with their counterparts in source countries to facilitate attractive pathways for these graduates to return home.

Amongst the positive implications of transience is how it treats international students: as agents capable of forming and reforming their own life courses. As a concept, it shows that students can actively choose it to enhance their lives, and not simply be disrupted by it. However, further research is needed to understand whether transience is always a choice. On the one hand, transience positions students as agents of their own life course, and thus offers new ways to understand permanence versus opportunities for further transience. On the other hand, transience can be a

condition that transnational migrants or students are forced to contend with, as “a spectre that is ever present not only in temporality but also in permanence. Multiple diverse actors become caught in a state of in-between and flux because their migrant(ion) journeys are unstable despite the illusion of stability” (Gomes, 2021, p. 667). Further research into the nature of transience itself could reveal that this concept—like educational mobility itself—is capable of pluralization.

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