World class? An investigation of globalisation, difference and international student mobility

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This paper explores the motivations and meanings of international student mobility. Central to the discussion are the results of a large questionnaire survey and associated in-depth interviews with UK students enrolled in universities in six countries from around the world. The results suggest, first, that several different dimensions of social and cultural capital are accrued through study abroad. It is argued that the search for ‘world class’ education has taken on new significance. Second, the paper argues that analysis of student mobility should not be confined to a framework that separates study abroad from the wider life-course aspirations of students. It is argued that these insights go beyond existing theorisations of international student mobility to incorporate recognition of diverse approaches to difference within cultures of mobility, including class reproduction of distinction, broader notions of distinction within the life-plans of individual students, and how ‘reputations’ associated with educational destinations are structured by individuals, institutions and states in a global higher education system that produces differentially mediated geographies of international student mobility.

key words international students higher education universities mobility globalisation difference

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Introduction

Education has long been recognised as more than a process that imparts formal knowledges. Some argue that education is as much about social privilege as it is about training the mind, and that education results in the reproduction of social difference (Bourdieu 1984; Jeffery et al. 2005). This is especially true with regard to differential access to higher education (HE). Hence, many social democracies have sought to improve access to HE through meritocratic means and widening participation strategies (David 2007; Morley and Lugg 2009). From this, one might argue that the increasingly globalised provision of HE would reduce differential access to universities by widening the market. On the other hand the global increase in the number of universities might imply a decline in demand for opportunities to study internationally, resulting in a reduction in international student flows. And yet, student migration has increased over recent decades¹ and has become one of the major forms of contemporary international mobility (Bhandari and Blumenthal 2009).

Much research on international student mobility has focused on short-term exchanges (‘credit mobility’) within regions such as the EU (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003); the tendency has been to
see these two-way flows as transient and unproblematic. This paper examines longer-term ‘degree mobility’, defined as taking an entire degree at a university outside one’s country of usual residence (Universities UK 2008). Although the current estimated stock of 33 000 UK students studying in HE institutions abroad (Higher Education International Unit 2010) is small compared with the 370 000 foreign students studying in the UK, the former number is not insignificant (equating to the student population of two medium-sized British universities). It is also an especially interesting group, since one might ask why so many UK citizens leave a country renowned for the quality of its universities. We suggest that seeking to understand this flow requires asking some very fundamental social questions. Not only is this one of many ‘new mobilities’ (Urry 2007) reshaping contemporary (Western) society, but it could be argued that international student mobility constitutes a critical means of intensifying social difference within the globalising higher education system (Marginson et al. 2007). Furthermore, treating the study of UK international students as an empirical lens to look at a much wider phenomenon (global student mobility) leads to questions about how the internationalisation of HE is linked to the reproduction of unevenness in the global labour market.

The specific objectives of this paper are, first, to investigate the differentiation of UK student migration trends; second, to interpret the motives for and experiences of UK international student mobility; and third, to theorise international student mobility in relation to the globalisation of higher education.

We start by reviewing the literature on international student mobility (ISM), with a specific focus on how ISM relates to the differentiation of universities in a global hierarchy and discourses around how an international education increases an individual’s cultural capital. New research results are then reported, both in terms of the statistical contours of UK ISM revealed by our surveys and from analysis of in-depth interviews with UK students living and studying in six principal destination countries. Through this process, we aim to offer a novel theorisation of key aspects of ISM, based on diverse processes of distinction which mediate the linkages between individual mobilities, the internationalisation of HE and the destinations of talent flows in the global economy.

### International student mobility in a globally differentiated education system

Over the last 10 years the literature on international student mobility (ISM) has increased markedly (Gürüz 2008; Solimano 2008; Varghese 2008; Williams and Balaz 2008). Extensive research has been conducted on credit mobility such as the European Erasmus scheme (Byram and Dervin 2006) but, overall, studies of degree mobility have dominated. This literature reflects the interest of education researchers in understanding how ISM is embedded in the complex relations linking globalisation, pedagogy and society (Brooks and Waters 2010; Edwards and Usher 2007; Gulson and Syme 2007; de Wit 2008).

Some have interpreted student mobility as the outcome of individual decisions reflecting personal characteristics such as gender, socio-economic background, language competence and personality (Dreher and Putvaara 2005; HEFCE 2004). These individual characteristics may be reinforced by propitious circumstances such as speaking a foreign language or, conversely, be negatively affected by inhibiting effects such as coming from a less privileged social background (Christie 2007; Findlay et al. 2006; Halsey 1993). In the UK, the effect of selectivity by social background is exaggerated for students seeking to study away from their parental home (Holdsworth 2006); one would expect this effect to be magnified for international student flows. Even where young people ‘escape’ their social background and gain a university degree, this achievement is often still insufficient to free them from their class or caste origins (Jeffery et al. 2005).

ISM has been structured not only by social class but also by the internationalisation of aspects of the education system (Teichler 2004; Yang 2003), by the rising economic competition for global talent (Kuptsch 2006), and by the geographies of cultural capital (Murphy-Lejune 2002; Ong 1999; Waters 2006). In what follows we seek a better understanding of what can be learned from analysing student mobility as a process linking three life-stage arenas (school, university and labour-market outcomes) rather than as a one-off migration ‘event’. Our focus is on understanding the differentiation of educational structures in relation to each of these three spatial arenas in order to interpret the meanings attached to ISM. By implication these ‘spaces’ operate at different scales, with universities, for
example, occupying institutional spaces nested within the geopolitical territories of state and trans-state systems (Gulson and Symes 2007). Nationally differentiated HE systems have increasingly been affected by political moves towards using common templates in education provision such as the Bologna process (Papatsiba 2006), globalising labour markets for codified high-level skills (Kuptsch 2006), and convergence in HE in many countries in favour of delivering some (or all) teaching in English. These kinds of international (some would say ‘global’) forces have not only been powerful in producing increasing similarities in HE around the globe, but also in generating an ever-more complex array of flows of people, knowledge and technology in response to differences between institutions and nations (Tapper and Palfreyman 2004).

‘Globalisation’ is of course a problematic term. Used in relation to education, ‘globalisation’ is too easily thought of as a discrete phenomenon (Gulson and Symes 2007, 8), associated only with embodied flows of students and teachers (Ackers and Gill 2008). At a more profound level it can signify a more complex range of geopolitical and cultural processes involved in transforming the spatial organisation of educational and social relations (Held and McGrew 2007; Singh et al. 2007). More specifically, so-called ‘globalisation’ of higher education has not only produced ‘spatial practices’ (Lefebvre 1991) such as international mobility, it has also been responsible for the changing cultural representation of university education. This has followed from neo-liberal state-driven policies that have spotlighted the differentiating social effects of unequal educational provision, not just nationally but internationally (Gulson and Symes 2007). In Lefebvre’s (1991) terms, these global engagements have in turn been responsible for ‘the contemporary production of mobile identities in and through international education’ (Singh et al. 2007, 198).

Focusing on universities as institutions through which these processes of differentiation have been reproduced, Marginson and van der Wande (2007) distinguish horizontal and vertical differences. Vertical differences include institutional features such as capacity (size and subject diversity), status (the university’s age or world ranking) and resources – all significant in differentiating institutions within the ‘field of power’ (Bourdieu 1984) that is higher education. Horizontal differences include level of specialisation, segmentation between private and public sector universities, language of instruction and academic culture. While these horizontal differences may not be a necessary reason for increased differentiation within a hierarchical system, Marginson et al. note that ‘under certain historical circumstances horizontal differences have vertical implications such as the advantage accruing to English language nations in this era’ (2007, 14).

Recent research has begun to shed light on these contextual forces within which student mobility and other exchanges take place (OECD 2004). It appears that the internationalisation of higher education has proceeded alongside increased global differentiation of the university system resulting in greater value being attached to particular degrees from particular places (Yang 2003). Thus while in the past most universities within a nation-state were assumed to offer degrees of similar quality underpinned by state funding, with only a very small number of HE institutions being identified as elite places to study, increasingly universities in Western democracies have been affected by governments’ espousal of neo-liberal agendas as a pretext for greatly reducing state funding and placing universities in competition with one another locally, nationally, and also internationally (Gill 2009; Sadlak and Cai 2007). A closer reading suggests that the so-called ‘globalisation’ of higher education, rather than proceeding alongside differentiation of the system, is fundamentally implicated in its transformation through a withdrawal of state funds and a shift to offering a marketable international commodity to students who are expected to perceive the value of education as lying beyond the nation-state (Singh et al. 2007, 195). Indeed the state may no longer even be a relevant starting point in analysing ‘quality’ and ‘equality’ in the provision of HE. Rather, it may ‘no longer [be] possible to draw political or even sociological-conceptual boundaries between national and international in the matter of social inequalities’ (Beck 2004, 149).

Over time increased participation levels in HE have driven up demand for access to the ‘best’ universities within an imagined or rank-listed world hierarchy. What is considered the ‘best’ university is of course a complex issue (Deem et al. 2008). Some might argue that the oldest elite universities come closest to offering what is socially constructed as the best traditional training. Commercial forces have seen other metrics (such as the citation impact of staff research publications in top journals) emerging and being used to construct global university league tables. For some students
conscious consideration of such hierarchies may be less important than simply being able to claim that their degree is distinctive from that of their peers because it was achieved by attending an institution outside their country of normal residence; this distinctiveness may be heightened if the location of the university is well known as a global city or world-renowned destination.

The unevenness of higher education has inevitably meant that certain social practices are deployed in an effort to reproduce social advantage through the globalised education system. We see this as an extension of Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1997) claim that education is the major player in the transmission of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1986) between generations. Brown (1995) and Noble and Davies (2009) have shown that cultural capital in the form of education is often a key marker of social inclusion and exclusion. According to Waters (2006), the growing middle class in China are seeking to maximise the cultural capital of the next generation by sending them to international elite universities. The cultural capital model of student migration therefore differs from the conventional human capital perspective in suggesting that it is the social benefits of gaining new knowledge, skills and education in another place that matter most. In particular the advantages associated with international study are thought to stretch beyond academic credentials and include features such as the cosmopolitan identities (Beck 2004) acquired as a result of international experience. The significance of cultural capital varies spatially and over time. For example, Waters suggests that international academic credentials have become ever-more valued by Chinese middle-class families at a time when improved provision has meant that the middle class no longer have ‘exclusive ownership of the rewards accruing’ from local HE access (2008, 8).

Achieving advantage is not restricted to transnational study opportunities, but extends throughout different stages of the education system, including sending children to international schools (Bunnell 2007) and to elite private institutions for their secondary education, where, as Bourdieu (1996, 79) has argued, the ‘state nobility’ establish situated experiences of education that produce ‘symbolic capital’ that they can draw on later in life. The most obvious example of social structures producing chains of influence might be the way that ‘situated practices’ in elite schools are important in the social development of pupils including helping to channel them into the top international universities (Waters 2007, 477).

Some of these ideas are brought together schematically in Figure 1, derived from extensive read-

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**Figure 1** Transnational and national student flows in relation to the differentiation of higher education and the global labour market

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ing of the literature on ISM (King et al. 2010) and from analysis of the authors’ recently completed school and international student surveys (Findlay et al. 2010b; King et al. 2011). At the heart of the diagram are the ‘world-class’ universities represented in relation to Marginson et al.’s (2007) vertical and horizontal differentiation of the HE system. Many state universities are, by contrast, ‘undifferentiated’ or lack characteristics that are perceived to add symbolic value to the degrees that they offer. Yet others have some desirable characteristics that might attract a selective flow of international students because they offer, for example, English-language instruction in disciplinary areas that might be very hard to access in the UK (e.g. medicine), or because they are located in what are perceived to be desirable locations (e.g. for subsequent settlement). The arrows represent flows of students between differentiated school and university systems and between the world hierarchy of universities and the global labour market. The schema therefore hints at the multiple border crossings involved in international student mobility: not just international political boundaries but other translations are also taking place. Social difference in the school system privileges access to world-class universities, while educational difference in a globalising HE system seems to influence the probability of an individual accessing favoured positions in the global labour market. Chains of influence might also be hypothesised in the flows of students between first and second degrees (not shown in the schema), with entry to top global universities being more likely by graduate students whose first degree is attained in a nationally leading institution.

Many other forces outside the HE sector have also facilitated an increase in ISM. The most obvious of these is increased transnationalism, producing large expatriate communities and rising numbers of transnational marriages. At a more conceptual level, the emergence of a transnational capitalist class (Sklair 2001) has created a demand for a HE system geared to the needs of the children of this elite group and capable of reproducing through the education system the political and social advantages that this group enjoys, such as being comfortable living and working in a diverse range of countries (Mazlish and Morss 2005).

Figure 1 adds two other features. First, it suggests a relation between student mobility and subsequent mobility aspirations: the motivation for international student mobility must at least in part be related to subsequent mobility intentions relating to the rest of the life-course. Thus, as Li et al. (1996) have noted, migrating to learn may be part of the process of learning to migrate. The suggestion here is that student mobility is not simply a subset of youth mobility culture, but part of a wider set of mobility cultures linked to a person’s outlook on their entire life-course (Brooks and Everett 2008). In Figure 1 this is represented as linked to a desire to engage in an international career.

Second, Figure 1 locates ISM within a frame that recognises the significance of other transnational, cultural, socio-economic and political processes. Figure 1 holds these as external to the main relationships that this paper seeks to investigate. We do, however, acknowledge the importance of these other dimensions of student mobility (such as European integration, the IT revolution, the use of English as the global academic language), as evidenced by the findings of other researchers (Maiworm and Teichler 1996; Mulder and Clark 2002; Varghese 2008).

The paper continues by asking how social difference may be influential in filtering access to international student mobility, before moving on to explore how studying abroad may in itself reproduce social difference. Specific research questions include:

- Is there evidence that private school education in the UK is associated with privileged access to international study opportunities?
- How do students perceive their moves and how important is the conceptualisation of a global hierarchy of universities in the choice of study destination?
- Is there a link between international student mobility and subsequent life-planning about mobility strategies?

Answering these questions is a first step towards extending theorisation of the relation between ISM and the reproduction of social difference.

**Methods**

To tackle the questions listed above, two main research tools were deployed. One involved a survey of application intentions of 1400 final-year pupils in two counties of England (Leicestershire and Sussex). The second was a study of 560 UK
students currently enrolled for study in universities in the USA, Australia, Ireland, France, Germany and the Czech Republic. This paper draws mainly on the latter survey. In addition to the questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews were conducted with 80 UK students studying abroad and with international recruitment officers in 16 higher education institutions from around the world, as well as with a number of key gatekeepers in the international student mobility system.

In the school survey the research design identified a mix of state and private-sector schools. The questionnaire quota samples were equally divided by type of school (700 state and 700 independent, 350 of each in each county) and by respondent gender (700 males, 700 females, 350 in each county). In addition to the pupil survey, interviews were conducted with school guidance teachers in most schools.

The international student survey was targeted on the five most important destinations for UK degree-mobile students. Our estimates for the most recent year for which data are available (2007–08) places the UK degree-mobile student population for the five most popular destinations at 8367 in USA, 2270 in Ireland, 1805 in Australia, 1635 in France and 445 in Germany (Findlay et al. 2010a). In addition to these destinations, we included the Czech Republic, listed as a top-10 destination for UK students in 2007–08 (OECD 2009). This location represents the new kinds of destination being chosen by some degree-mobile students.

Our strategy was to concentrate the questionnaire survey on the universities with the highest numbers of UK students. It proved possible in advance of the survey to determine these universities in USA, Ireland, Australia and the Czech Republic (IIE 2007). The research team visited 16 universities across the six countries to conduct interviews. Once permission and ethical approval were granted, the questionnaire was e-mailed to the UK student population in each university. In addition, electronic responses were received from students in a further 18 universities in the USA, Australia, France and Germany.

The final set of universities from which responses were received included some of the best universities in the world (at least in terms of the 2009 Times Higher Education rankings), but there were also some lower-ranked universities within our sample. Being reflexive about our methods, we would note that it is difficult, in the absence of any robust sampling frame, to know how representative the final sample of responses might be, especially in view of the possibility of selectivity effects. We were, however, encouraged by the similarity of our sample profile on variables that could be compared with the school survey. Our purpose here, however, is to use the questionnaire results primarily to establish the contours of how student mobility interfaces with the globalisation of higher education, while turning to our in-depth interviews to explore the meanings of such moves in more detail.

The strengths of the study are that it is the largest survey of its kind on UK degree-mobile students; the sample size and the diversity of countries and universities included in the survey add weight to the findings. The focus on the UK is timely given subsequent political events that have seen the UK government, following the 2010 general election, accelerate the neo-liberal agenda involving a very significant rise in tuition fees that may drive more UK students to study abroad. In general, however, we see ISM from the UK as representing a spatial practice observed widely in advanced economies following neo-liberal education agendas favouring accretive privatisation (Singh et al. 2007).

Just over half the responses came from undergraduate students abroad (52%), the remainder were on postgraduate taught courses (mostly one-year) or doing research degrees. In testing the robustness of our conclusions, we examined undergraduates and postgraduates initially together and then separately. Not surprisingly, differences were evident in relation to variables such as age and the funding of international study. Critically, from the perspective of this paper, there was no significant difference in terms of the ranking of motivations for studying abroad. The desire to attend a ‘world-class’ institution was the most frequently cited reason: 86.5 per cent and 90.8 per cent of undergraduates and postgraduates respectively reported this motive as very important or of some importance. More detailed analysis of the sample by course of study can be found in Findlay et al. (2009, 16; 2010b, 26). The survey included 218 UK students at US universities, 200 in Ireland and 108 in Australia, with the remainder in France, Germany and the Czech Republic.

Statistical contours of UK international student mobility

The school survey confirmed the effect of social structures on international mobility choices. Amongst UK nationals in English schools, 2.8 per cent of state and
5.5 per cent of independent sector pupils reported that they had applied to universities outside the UK. Thus, pupils in the independent sector are twice as likely to apply to study abroad. Bearing in mind that 89 per cent of final-year pupils in England are in state schools and only 11 per cent in independent schools, the result of this selectivity is that independent schools ended up accounting for 45 per cent of all respondents to our international student survey, reflecting the social power of this minority.

The comment of one of the guidance teachers is revealing in relation to the emphasis on the ‘make-up’ of pupils as ‘very international’. Asked about whether her pupils considered studying abroad, she noted:

We’ve had a fair number, obviously smaller than the ones that go to British universities. I would say 5 or 6 every year [go to the United States] and we have had girls go to Australia and Canada. I think it is partly the make-up of the students we have, because they are all very international. So the idea of going abroad is already part of their make-up. (Guidance teacher, Independent girls boarding school)

While international ‘make-up’ may in part reflect the geographical mix of origins of pupils in this school, the comment also hints at the social construction of ‘internationality’ within this educational milieu. This kind of response was widespread in independent-sector boarding schools, emphasising the social and cultural linkages associated with having overseas pupils, as well as the international orientation of the schools themselves (King et al. 2011). The structuring of international destination choices was also far from random. This was reinforced by the results of the school questionnaire survey, with 51 per cent of those applying to international universities selecting one in the USA as their top choice. This selectivity at the level of country of destination supports the thesis that the globalisation of HE opportunities results in an uneven geography of international student flows.

Following previous research (Bourdieu 1996; Waters 2007) pointing to the shaping of a ‘common culture’ in elite schools, our survey also points to the role of independent schools in the active structuring of an international outlook supported by information flows about international universities. One way in which ‘outward-oriented global rather than inward-oriented local perspectives’ (Skilair 2001, 4) are produced is through staff at independent schools not only providing information about international universities but also helping with the evaluation of the information. They were four times more likely to do so than was the case in state schools.

Statistical differences between state and independent schools were also evident in terms of how international study was financed. The international student survey revealed that 47 per cent of those who had attended independent schools received financial support from their parents to study abroad compared with only 24 per cent of students from state schools. The latter group was much more likely to depend on winning scholarships or grants from charitable bodies.

The distinction between independent and state education was less evident in terms of students’ motivations for studying outside the UK (Table I). Quantifying drivers of international mobility is of course highly problematic, not only given the socially and temporally embedded nature of all mobility choices, but also given the multi-causal nature of most migration decisions (Halfacree 2004). Nevertheless the results in Table I reinforce

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>State school</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Statistically significant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determined to attend a world-class university</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study outside the UK as an opportunity for a unique adventure</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The first step towards an international career</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited course places at a UK university to study chosen discipline</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student fees in the UK</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family encouragement to study outside UK</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Students were asked to rate all variables listed in the table. Thus percentages do not sum to 100%. N = 512

Chi-square test for cell frequencies for 2 x 2 tabulations for each horizontal row in Table I versus all other outcomes. Significance reported at p = 0.05.
the view that the globalisation of higher education is a highly uneven process and that student movers are very conscious of this in the choices they make. Table I confirms that the single largest driver of mobility is to access world-class universities; this was even more important for students who had attended independent schools. Similarly, respondents from independent schools were much more likely to claim that their decision to study abroad could be seen as a first step towards an international career. On all other mobility drivers there was no statistical difference between the two sectors.

Unpacking the meanings of international mobility

In search of world-class education

The students we interviewed seemed very aware not only of how education produced social difference but of the way that the place of study had a critical differentiating influence. Supporting Table I, many alluded to the existence of a global hierarchy of universities. They tended to rationalise their choice of study location in terms of being at a ‘world-class’ university. This often started from identifying a self-imposed constraint that they would only consider elite UK universities, followed by a shortlist of universities in other countries.

In England I felt like that my only real options were either to go to Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh or Durham. And I only got Edinburgh as an offer. (Anna, undergraduate, Trinity College Dublin)

This ‘elite list’ was not simply a minor feature of students’ discursive consciousness but a key strategic tool which they discussed at length in relation to the concepts of educational ‘value’ and ‘difference’. Consider Donna’s interpretation:

You can go to so many universities to get a degree and get a degree in so many different things. There is so much talk in the newspapers of the devaluing of degrees, so I think that this is a way of making your CV stand out a little more. You didn’t just get a degree, you went half way round the world to get a degree [laughs]. It’s a different thing in a situation where you are constantly hearing that degrees aren’t worth anything and everybody has a degree. And degrees are being devalued by the second, so it’s something different I think. … I suppose I looked at the Ivy League universities in the US. If I was going to make the trek over here and give up Cambridge, it needed to be something that was equally enjoyable and taxing and look[ed] good on my CV… (Donna, undergraduate, Columbia University)

For Donna, not only had the wider intake to UK universities devalued having a degree, but the strategy for valorising her studies was to seek out Ivy League locations so that the ‘difference’ in her CV would be not just that she studied abroad, but would be distinguished by her attending a university whose social and academic status was hierarchically differentiated relative to the US university system.

‘Difference’ was a necessary but not sufficient condition for international mobility. For those seeking a ‘world-class’ university, the institution had to be ‘recognised’. Students repeatedly referred to the importance of selecting universities that were well-known for their ‘reputation’.

I wanted an MBA which people would not think [it] is just from [some] tiny university in the middle of nowhere, and which was actually recognized in the UK. (Susan, postgraduate, Berkeley)

Some students revealed that going abroad was a consequence of failing to get a place in the UK, but it was more usual to study abroad despite having already gained access to their preferred UK choice:

the Harvard website is pretty cool; I like[d] the look of it. I guess that when I applied it was more like … I’ll give it a go and see what happens. I also applied to Cambridge. Maybe when I started, it was like a back-up in case I didn’t get into Cambridge, but I got accepted into Cambridge … (Ben, undergraduate, Harvard)

Amongst those explaining why attending a ‘world-class’ university was very important, 79 per cent commented that restrictions on places at UK universities had not been the reason for going abroad. For most students, studying abroad was not therefore a response to failure to get a place (say at Oxford or Cambridge) or a ‘second chance’ to achieve the perceived success of studying at a top university (Brooks and Waters 2009).

The main exception to this position was for undergraduates set on obtaining a very specific disciplinary training, particularly on professionally recognised courses with fierce competition for places in the UK, such as medicine and veterinary science. John and Brian, below, illustrate the awareness of some students of international routes to access restricted professions. Their experience also reflects the globalisation of higher education including the diffusion of English-language pro-
grammes curricula to non-English-speaking countries.

I actually applied to a couple [of UK universities] … Three times, I applied – once when I was eighteen, and I got the offer but not the grades. Then I got the interview, but not the place, so I got closer. […] It was basically impossible. […] It was just, as far as I can tell, the last opportunity to get myself into any kind of medical course. (Brian, undergraduate, Charles University, Prague)

I didn’t apply to do medicine in England as I knew I wouldn’t get the grades. I applied to do biomedical sciences [in the UK] and I got my places for that course in my chosen universities but I was offered by my parents to go to Prague and study medicine straight away and I took the opportunity as I didn’t want to waste the time/money doing a random medically-related degree … (John, undergraduate, Charles University, Prague)

There are other important points that emerge from these quotes that deserve comment. First, it is clear from Brian and John that not all international students are set on ‘world-class’ universities; as indicated in Figure 1, there are some students who see international study as serving other goals (Table I).

Second, the fact that universities want to attract international students for financial and other reasons means that the international education ‘business’ has to some extent been shaped to meet these demands. This has interfaced not only with the growth of English-language courses on campuses in non-Anglophone countries but also with a differentiated set of strategies to recruit international students in relation to diverse student motives for mobility (such as engaging in the ‘adventure’ of studying abroad, accessing an international career etc.) as listed in Table I.

Individualising cultural capital

The above analysis corresponds to the expectations of a cultural capital model, whereby social class is reproduced through international mobility in an era of global higher education opportunities. Our research goes further, suggesting the importance of other dimensions of educational ‘difference’.

In contrast to the student voices reported above, many interviewees explained their decision to study abroad, not so much in terms of attending a world-class university, but in terms of avoiding being the same as other UK students. Studying somewhere ‘different’ was perceived to distinguish them from ‘stay-at-home’ students. See how Emma

and Ed reference themselves relative to their peers, as well as to their perceptions of taking ‘one step further’ to find a place to study:

I went and stayed with some friends at [English city N] and I applied to [university SJ] – this just wasn’t me, it just didn’t seem to have that kind of vibe or buzz or anything. No one seemed excited to be there, no one seemed like proud that they were, you know it wouldn’t be like you were interviewed for a job at home and be like. ‘Oh I went to N’ and someone would be like, ‘Oh, so did I, oh, you should have the job’ kind of thing. No, they would be like ‘Oh, whatever’. (Emma, undergraduate, University of South California)

the idea of studying abroad was one step further than my friends were doing. All my friends were going to Leeds or Durham or whatever. I quite liked the idea of doing something different. Like I said, it was one step further than what my friends were doing, which I thought was kind of cool. (Ed, undergraduate, Trinity College Dublin)

Both Emma and Calum (below) also linked their thinking to ideas about what employers perceive as distinctive. Calum reports his perception that certain ‘tacit knowledges’ (Williams and Balaz 2009) gained from ‘working outside’ would add distinction in the eyes of an employer.

I think that just living abroad is something which gives you a different perspective on life. […] I also think that studying abroad gives you an advantage in terms of employers even if you want to work in the UK because you have shown that you could live abroad, you are showing, especially studying in Europe, within the European Union, I think that’s a very important part of society and employers are looking for kind of that ability to work outside. (Calum, postgraduate, Free University of Berlin)

These student voices therefore illustrate the way that social constructions of difference can add symbolic capital even where the student is not seeking a ‘world-class’ location. This is not a commentary on the institutions in which Emma, Ed and Calum were enrolled, but it points to the need to recognise the complexity of forces that shape the pattern of student flows.

Student migration and mobility across the life-course

The emerging emphasis on differentiated mobility cultures merits further investigation from the perspective of the students in our survey. The migra-
Table II  Country of study in relation to plans to live outside UK after graduation (% of undergraduates by country of study)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of study</th>
<th>Ireland (n = 200)</th>
<th>Australia (n = 108)</th>
<th>USA (n = 218)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Live outside UK</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Immigration literature frequently creates false dichotomies between, for example, labour migration and other forms of mobility (King 2002). This false binary is also found in literature on student migration. Student mobility is often seen as discrete and disconnected from other mobilities. Instead our research supports Brooks and Everett’s (2008) finding that some students engage in ‘life planning’, with decisions on student mobility often being embedded in an individual’s life-course aspirations and plans for mobility over the longer run.

Amongst UK students enrolled in foreign universities, 42 per cent had previously lived abroad at some point in their earlier life for a period of 6 months or longer, providing evidence of previous transnational experiences and networks (Vertovec 2009). This mobile group was statistically much more likely to want to attend a world-class university,5 or to see their student mobility as linked to an international career after graduation.6 Looking to the future, students in some destinations were much more likely to declare an intention to remain after graduation, thus turning an educationally-motivated move into a longer-term form of labour migration or even settlement (Table II).7 This opens up the important issue of the multiple scales that impinge on ‘destination’ decisions. While at one level, students may select their study destination in terms of perceptions of the educational status and quality of an individual institution, the location of a university within a particular country may also be important, particularly in relation to that state’s policy on immigration and citizenship that could open up settlement possibilities after graduation. Equally, a country’s economic prospects could influence students’ interests in studying there, as a future employment destination.

Table II explores one effect of these contrasts for the three main study-abroad destinations in our student survey. Less than a third of the respondents in Ireland intended ‘definitely’ to remain abroad after graduation, compared with half those in the USA and 71 per cent in Australia. Some students in Australia explained that their study plans were part of an explicit strategy to qualify for longer-term residence and citizenship.

While I was working somebody discussed going to Australia and […] so we went and travelled everywhere, loved it, yes, just adored it and tried to get back and eventually got back. […] I’d kind of fallen out with the UK. So I threw all my energies into coming back here. So I’m not going back to the UK. My plan is definitely to stay here, absolutely. I’m not studying because I want to, I’m studying because it is the only way I can stay here really, at the moment. (James, undergraduate, Macquarie, Australia)

With the exception of Australia, settler emigration was not of great importance to most students. Some, unsurprisingly, had yet to form clear plans for the future. Where future plans had been formed, there was a distinct range of expectations linked to the character of the study destination. The claim that all knowledge is situated may be a truism, but in relation to globalisation of education and the mobility of UK students there was strong evidence that the meanings and interpretations of mobility varied markedly with the context not only of study but of future mobility intentions. Thus, for most respondents in the USA their self-perception was that their decision to study there was either part of a strategy to enter an international career, or that the experience of living in another culture had opened their eyes to the possibility of working abroad (often in a different country) and developing an internationally mobile trajectory. Amongst UK students in the USA, only 11 per cent expected to return to the UK to work immediately after graduating, but this was not because most intended to settle in the USA, but because they had other plans for onward occupational mobility within their specialism in the global labour market. Consider the cases of Donna and Sarah.

I want to go back into [profession X] which is what I was doing immediately before coming here. Being here … originally part of what attracted me was the [discipline A] school here which is arguably the best in the world for [this subject]. I suppose longer, longer-term … I see myself going to London first and doing a couple of years work in London and then hopefully moving to work abroad, but for a London-based (company). (Donna, undergraduate, Columbia University)
I will likely be working overseas, so if that’s the case I need(ed) to go to an institution that has an international reputation. I had no interest of studying at Oxford or Cambridge. (Sarah, postgraduate, Australian National University)

Most students who had formed views of their future therefore interpreted their decision to study abroad as part of a progression (not as the literature might infer as a simple transition from the parental home to independent living as an adult) from a national to an international context, with the ‘international reputation’ (Sarah) of the university helping to trampoline the student into an internationally oriented career. And a student’s return to the UK was often seen as dependent on whether or not an international career path happened to pass through the UK (Donna).

In summary, the evidence presented suggests that understanding the intended final labour-market destination of students (Figure 1) is critical to explaining the earlier ‘choices’ linking moves from home/school to universities abroad.

Conclusions

Internationalisation of higher education has produced many profound changes in social and cultural relations around the world. This paper has focused on three features of the relation between the globalisation of HE and student mobility. First, it has argued that class seeks to reproduce itself through educational advantage with pupils from independent/private schools being more likely to gain access to university education in other countries. Second, it has explored the meaning of seeking a ‘world-class’ university, arguing that the social construction of an outstanding international university has resulted in a global hierarchy of institutions and that the majority of international students from the UK are concentrated in a few countries and in elite or specialised institutions. Third, globalisation of student flows cannot be isolated from wider mobility trajectories both before and after study. It appears that a ‘world-class’ education for some is embedded in a mobility culture that attaches symbolic capital to the very performance of international living and that aspires to engage in international career trajectories that some might see as the hallmark of the transnational capitalist class (Sklair 2001).

The research findings presented in this paper have therefore sought to redress the limited theorisation of international student mobility. Brooks and Waters (2009 2011) and Waters (2006) are clear exceptions to this generalisation. Our aim in this paper has been to challenge the misperception that student mobility is an unproblematic transient phenomenon. Our analysis has also implied UK students are not ‘exceptional’ international students, but are part of much wider processes of social differentiation at multiple levels that require further research (Bhandari and Blumethal 2009). International student mobility is therefore not only about gaining the kinds of formal knowledges that can be imparted through high-quality university training (that could arguably be offered by a leading national university in a student’s country of origin), but also about other socially and culturally constructed knowledges. It seems probable that over time the differentiation of HE at a global level will only increase as social processes produce an ever more distinctive global hierarchy of institutions in relation to socially constructed ‘reputations’ and increasingly sophisticated authenticity claims about what constitutes a ‘world-class’ university (Deem et al. 2008; Sadlak and Cai 2007).

A second theoretical contribution has been to explore Bourdieu’s (1986) ideas of the middle class building cultural capital through the education system, with the particularity of international education opportunities helping to reproduce advantage. In some cases this may be a strategy to circumvent failure to get a place at one of the UK’s elite universities, but the survey showed that search for foreign study opportunities was not always related to attending an Ivy League or equivalent high status university. Some of our interviewees argued for other aspects of ‘distinctiveness’ and ‘difference’ that would be used on a world stage differentiating their employment credentials from those of other graduates. Above all, international student migration was seen to be about symbolic capital. One of the uses of this symbolic capital was to represent international study as a distinguishing identity marker. Students believed that their international experience could be deployed advantageously in their future career trajectories. The spatial imaginaries of these students suggested that international education and the resultant cosmopolitan identities associated with international study (Beck 2004) would assist their international careers rather than being applied in the labour markets of their country of origin.

Third, the in-depth interviews point to the ways in which young people, generally from more
privileged backgrounds and with the best school exam results, express a desire to act on their future mobility and study plans in relation to their individualistic goals (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) thus shaping distinctive educational and career trajectories. Simply by being ‘different’, they saw themselves as achieving ‘distinction’ through mobility. This arguably is a different form of cultural capital that reaches beyond the traditional national ‘class’ structures identified by Bourdieu and Passeron (1997), pointing instead to the aspiration to be ‘world-class’ or part of a transnational elite where mobility is part of what provides ‘distinction’ (Skilair 2001). Furthermore the research points to the need to situate knowledges of mobility not only geographically but also in relation to different life-course trajectories. Indeed, there is an important research agenda here that establishes more clearly the links between student mobilities and other mobilities. It is also important to establish to what extent international mobility (for education or otherwise) acts to facilitate social mobility, rather than just to reproduce difference. Our research certainly confirms that mapping the meanings of the geography of international student mobility demands a more complex understanding of how educational ‘difference’ mediates the relations between ‘class’ and ‘world-class’.

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Notes

1 In the USA foreign students have more than doubled since 1980 (IIE 2009) reaching 672 000 in 2009, while the number of foreign students in UK Higher Education Institutes has more than quadrupled since 1980 (Findlay 2011).

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