

“DEMOCRATIZING” INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY (ISM)?

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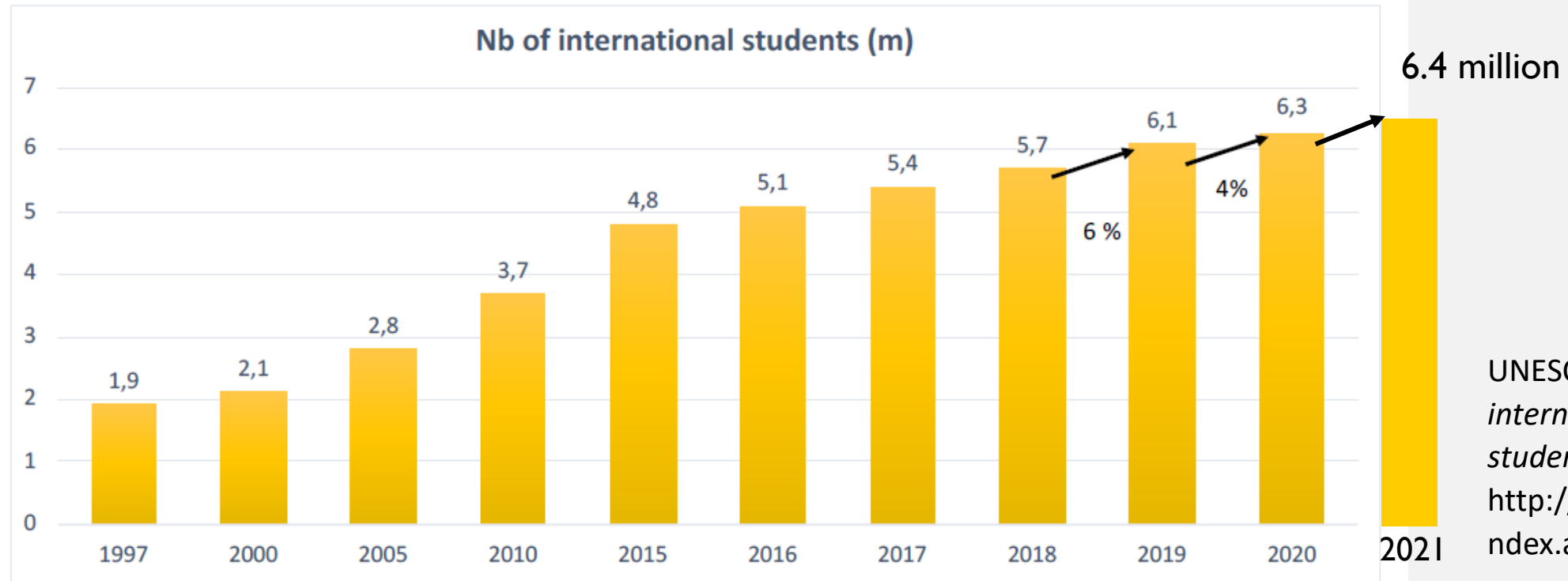
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INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY (ISM)

+ 30% over the last five years, but only... **3%** of the student population in TE (n=236 m)



UNESCO. (2023). *Outbound internationally mobile students by host region*. <http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=3807>

UNESCO Institute for Statistics, October 2022, cited in <http://timeassociation.org> “International student mobility at a Glance 2022”

ISM & SOCIAL REPRODUCTION / PRIVILEGE

- ISM → **reproduction of social inequalities**, through the accumulation and conversion of capitals in the Bourdieusian sense (economic/social/cultural capital) (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Waters & Brooks, 2021)
- broadly speaking, cross-border educational mobility is accessed by **relatively better-positioned individuals and groups in society** due to the resources required
- the bulk of globally mobile students come from **high- and upper middle-income countries**, who account for 27% and 40% respectively of total outwardly mobile students” & “high-income countries enrolled 76% of all globally mobile degree-seeking students” (Choudaha & de Wit, 2019)

- Brooks, R., & Waters, J. (2011). *Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education*. Palgrave.
- Choudaha, R., & de Wit, H. (2019). *Finding a sustainable future for student mobility*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190205110138464>
- Waters, J., & Brooks, R. (2021). *Student Migrants and Contemporary Educational Mobilities*. Palgrave.

IS ISM “DEMOCRATIC”?



“unlikely movements” (F. L. Collins & Ho, 2018)

“unlikely education destinations” (Ortiga, 2022)

the over 6 million mobile students amounting to only **3 per cent** of the world’s approximately 236 million students in tertiary education (World Bank, 2021), ISM is *far from* a “mass” phenomenon either

UNESCO Institute for Statistics, October 2022, cited by <http://timeassociation.org> “International student mobility at a Glance 2022”

- Collins, F. L., & Ho, K. C. (2018). Discrepant knowledge and interAsian mobilities: Unlikely movements, uncertain futures. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 39(5), 679–693. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2018.1464429>
- Ortiga, Y. Y. (2022). Student Mobility, Employability, and Unlikely Education Destinations in Asia. In W. O. Lee, P. Brown, A. L. Goodwin, & A. Green (Eds.), *International Handbook on Education Development in Asia-Pacific* (pp. 1–15). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-2327-1_65-1

UNPACKING “DEMOCRATIZATION” IN THE CONTEXT OF ISM

- “Democratization” ... **access**
 - The widening of access to ISM
 - More equitable, if not equal/egalitarian, distribution of ISM **opportunities** and **experiences**
- *Who has access to ISM?*
- *Who has access to **what kind of** ISM (in terms of destination countries, institutions, type of programmes, etc.)?*
- *What do the subjects (of mobility) obtain from ISM in terms of learning experience, the value of the credentials, future potentials/opportunities?*
- ...
- → The **Accessibility Perspective**

UNPACKING “DEMOCRATIZATION” IN THE CONTEXT OF ISM

- Democracy
 - “rule by the people” / “people power”: political systems and forms of governance in which **power** ultimately rests with the people, or *demos*
 - “**power is what democracy is essentially about**” (Bassiouni, 1998, p. 3, emphasis added)
 - this **power** refers to **people’s power to decide on things according to their own autonomous will**, as illustrated in the *Vienna Declaration on Human Rights* (1993) which says
 - “**Democracy is based on the freely-expressed will of the people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives**” (p. 878).

UNPACKING “DEMOCRATIZATION” IN THE CONTEXT OF ISM

- According to Markoff (2005), Democracy is often associated with
 - **Freedom**: essential liberties with respect to one’s person and in areas such as expression, faith/conscience, and assembly
 - **Equality**: equality of citizens’ rights and responsibilities (including the rights of receiving education) and equality before the law
 - **Accountability**: how those who rule on behalf of the people should be held accountable to the people
 - **Competition**: the principle that “open competition for office is an important process in all modern democracies” (Markoff, 2005 p. 193)

UNPACKING “DEMOCRATIZATION” IN THE CONTEXT OF ISM

- Echoing these ideas, Beetham (1998, p. 21) similarly asserts that “[t]he basic principles of democracy are that the **people have a right to a controlling influence over public decision and decision-makers**, and that they should be treated with equal respect and as of equal worth in the context of such decisions”.
- To achieve such a “controlling influence” over decision-makers (namely, those in power by virtue of popular consent), mechanisms of **accountability**, including an emphasis on **transparency** (Bassiouni, 1998), are necessary.
- Beetham (1998) also stresses that **the starting point of democracy “is the dignity of the individual person”** (p. 21; emphasis added) and that citizens under a democracy should be “**active participants** in the collective decision and policies which affect their lives” (p. 21).

- Bassiouni, C. (1998). Toward a Universal Declaration on the Basic Principles of Democracy: From Principles to Realisation. In Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (Ed.), *Democracy: Its Principles and Achievement* (pp. 1–20). Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).
- Beetham, D. (1998). Democracy: Key Principles, Institutions and Problems. In Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (Ed.), *Democracy: Its Principles and Achievement* (pp. 21–30). Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).

UNPACKING “DEMOCRATIZATION” IN THE CONTEXT OF ISM

- In addition to the issue of **access**, there is clearly a wider set of values, concepts, and issues (including but not limited to **power, freedom/autonomy, dignity, accountability, transparency, active participation, competition**) that are just as pertinent, if not more so, to the question of whether ISM can be considered “democratic”.
- In contrast to the accessibility perspective which focuses on who gets to access ISM, *these latter values, concepts, and issues have more to do with how ISM stakeholders are positioned vis-à-vis one another; how their relationships and interactions are structured; and how specific ISM-related activities are conducted.*
- → **“relational-conduct perspective”**

UNPACKING “DEMOCRATIZATION” IN THE CONTEXT OF ISM

- **Relational-Conduct** perspective
 - Amongst the stakeholders who interact with one another within the ISM field, *who holds power? Who holds more power? Is there an over-concentration of power in the hands of certain actors?*
 - Is there *transparency* in the more powerful parties' behaviour?
 - Is the conduct of the powerful held *accountable* to those who are less powerful but who nevertheless are the source of the power and profit of the powerful (analogous to the relationship between people and the political officeholders in a democracy)?
 - Is the *dignity* and *autonomy* of the less powerful actors respected?
 - Can they *actively participate in decision-making and exercise choice* within a context of healthy competition?

UNPACKING “DEMOCRATIZATION” IN THE CONTEXT OF ISM

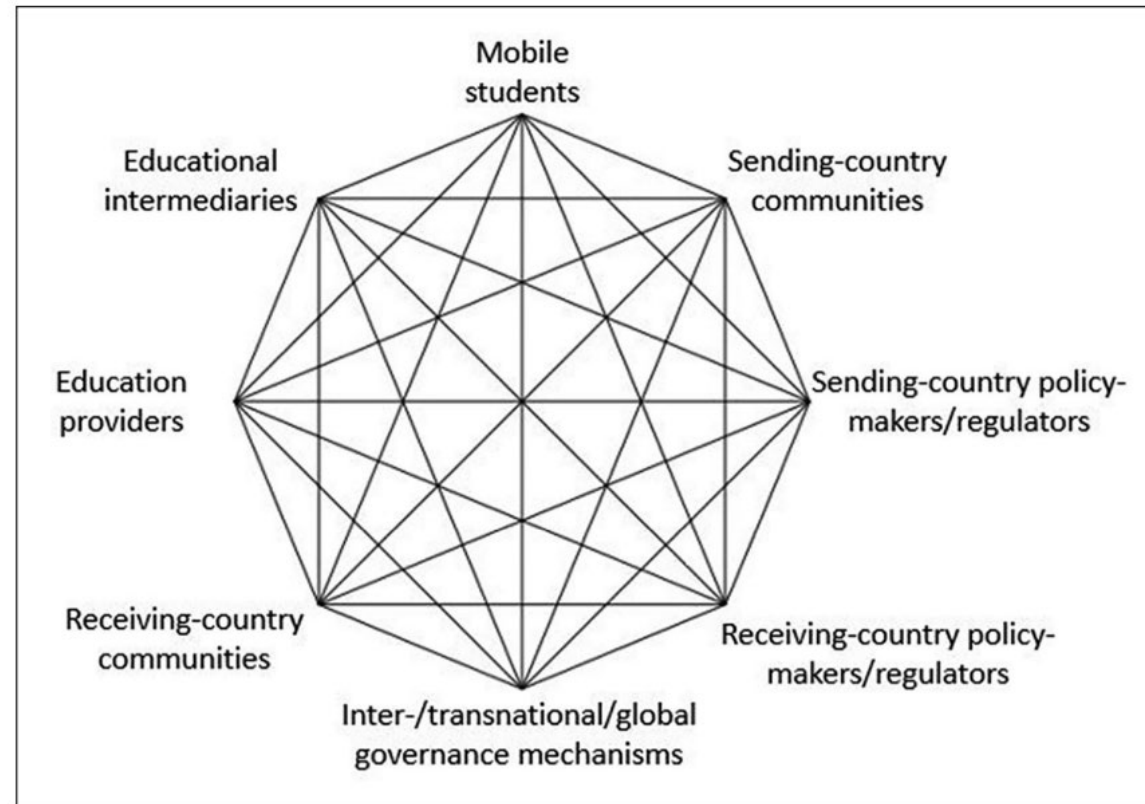


Figure 1. Key ISM actors.

Note. ISM = international student mobility.

UNPACKING “DEMOCRATIZATION” IN THE CONTEXT OF ISM

Democratization of International Student Mobility (ISM)

Two perspectives

“Accessibility perspective”

Concerned with:

- the widening of access to ISM
- more equitable distribution of ISM opportunities and experiences

“Relational-Conduct perspective”

Concerned with:

- the extent to which the relationships and conduct between key ISM actors are aligned with key democratic values and principles in terms of, among other things:
 - power balance
 - freedom/autonomy
 - dignity of the individual
 - active participation
 - transparency/accountability
 - competition/choice

ISM DEMOCRATIZATION: THE ACCESSIBILITY PERSPECTIVE

- the question is no longer about ISM being an elitist pursuit only accessible to the most privileged individuals and groups in society, since growing evidence shows that **students of a wide spectrum of academic caliber, socioeconomic status, and geographical backgrounds are also participating in educational mobility.**
- the issue now seems to be the **further stratification and differentiation of ISM opportunities** in such a way that **those from less privileged backgrounds tend to end up with study-abroad experiences that are less rewarding.**
- **The point is, even if ISM may now be available to more people, “not all study abroad is the same”** (P. Yang, 2018, p. 735).

- Yang, P. (2018b). Understanding Youth Educational Mobilities in Asia: A Comparison of Chinese ‘Foreign Talent’ Students in Singapore and Indian MBBS Students in China. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 39(6), 722–738.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2018.1533534>

ISM DEMOCRATIZATION: THE ACCESSIBILITY PERSPECTIVE

- The **conflict theory** in the sociology of education (R. Collins, 1971)
- The theory of **education as a “positional good”** that is primarily about scarcity and hierarchical distinction (Hirsch, 1976). Simply put, **if more people can access international educational mobility, then the distinction between superior forms of mobility (for example, prestigious institutions in world-leading nations) and inferior ones becomes salient.**
- As much research from the industrialized world has demonstrated, widened access to higher education has not led to greater equality of opportunities or outcome. **More or less the same scenario has played out with respect to international higher education.**

- Collins, R. (1971). Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification. *American Sociological Review*, 36(6), 1002–1019. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2093761>
- Hirsch, F. (1976). *Social Limits to Growth*. Harvard University Press.

ISM DEMOCRATIZATION: THE ACCESSIBILITY PERSPECTIVE

- **Counter argument 1:** **advances in digital technology** may render education (including international mobility) more democratic, by creating innovative practices in the virtual space that lower the barriers of access for large numbers of disadvantaged participants.
- **Counter argument 2:** **merit-based sponsored mobility** mechanisms (typically scholarship programmes) that seek to enable deserving individuals to access educational mobility opportunities regardless of their background, sometimes even favouring those from disadvantaged backgrounds (akin to affirmative actions)

ISM DEMOCRATIZATION: THE ACCESSIBILITY PERSPECTIVE

Counter argument I: advances in digital technology may render education (including international mobility) more democratic, by creating innovative practices in the virtual space that lower the barriers of access for large numbers of disadvantaged participants.

- if educational mobility is indeed a process of capital accumulation as argued by many ISM scholars, then physical mobility – preferably over extended periods of time – is the unquestionably better condition for the acquisition of embodied forms of cultural and social capital, which requires immersive corporeal work *in situ*.
- virtual mobilities may be more accessible due to the lower barriers, but it is likely to be considered an inferior and inauthentic form of mobility

- Cheng, Y., Yeoh, B., & Yang, P. (2023). Virtual student mobility on Zoom: Digital platforms and differentiated experiences of international education and (im)mobilities in a time of pandemic. *Mobilities*, 18(5), 839–854.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2023.2209824>

ISM DEMOCRATIZATION: THE ACCESSIBILITY PERSPECTIVE

Counter argument 2: merit-based sponsored mobility mechanisms (typically scholarship programmes) that seek to enable deserving individuals to access educational mobility opportunities regardless of their background, sometimes even favouring those from disadvantaged backgrounds (akin to affirmative actions)

- those who benefit from such schemes are a small minority
- Michael Sandel: Implementing meritocracy too thoroughly will lead to a cruel form of elitism that decimates empathy, solidarity, and a sense of common good that are key to healthy democratic societies. The hubris of the elites who believe they have earned their status meritoriously (typically through educational success), in Sandel's view, is akin to a form of "tyranny".

- Yang, P. (2022a). China in the global field of international student mobility: An analysis of economic, human and symbolic capitals. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 52(2), 308–326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1764334>
- Sandel, M. J. (2020). *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* Penguin.

ISM DEMOCRATIZATION: THE ACCESSIBILITY PERSPECTIVE

Counter argument 2: merit-based sponsored mobility mechanisms (typically scholarship programmes) that seek to enable deserving individuals to access educational mobility opportunities regardless of their background, sometimes even favouring those from disadvantaged backgrounds (akin to affirmative actions)

- Globally speaking, there is evidence that state-funded or affordable ISM opportunities have been shrinking (Choudaha, 2020).
 - gradual introduction over the past two decades of differentiated (read higher) tuition fees for non-EU/EEA international students in various countries in continental Europe, traditionally regarded as a stronghold of social democratic values of equality/egalitarianism.
 - International student fees were introduced in Denmark and Sweden in 2007 and 2011 respectively (ibid.), and in Finland in 2017 (mastersportal.com, 2022). Austria and the Netherlands both charge higher fees to non-European international students as well (ibid.).

ISM DEMOCRATIZATION: THE ACCESSIBILITY PERSPECTIVE

Democratization of International Student Mobility (ISM)

Two perspectives

“Accessibility perspective”

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pessimistic

“Relational-Conduct perspective”

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 - transparency/accountability
 - competition/choice

ISM DEMOCRATIZATION: THE RELATIONAL-CONDUCT PERSPECTIVE

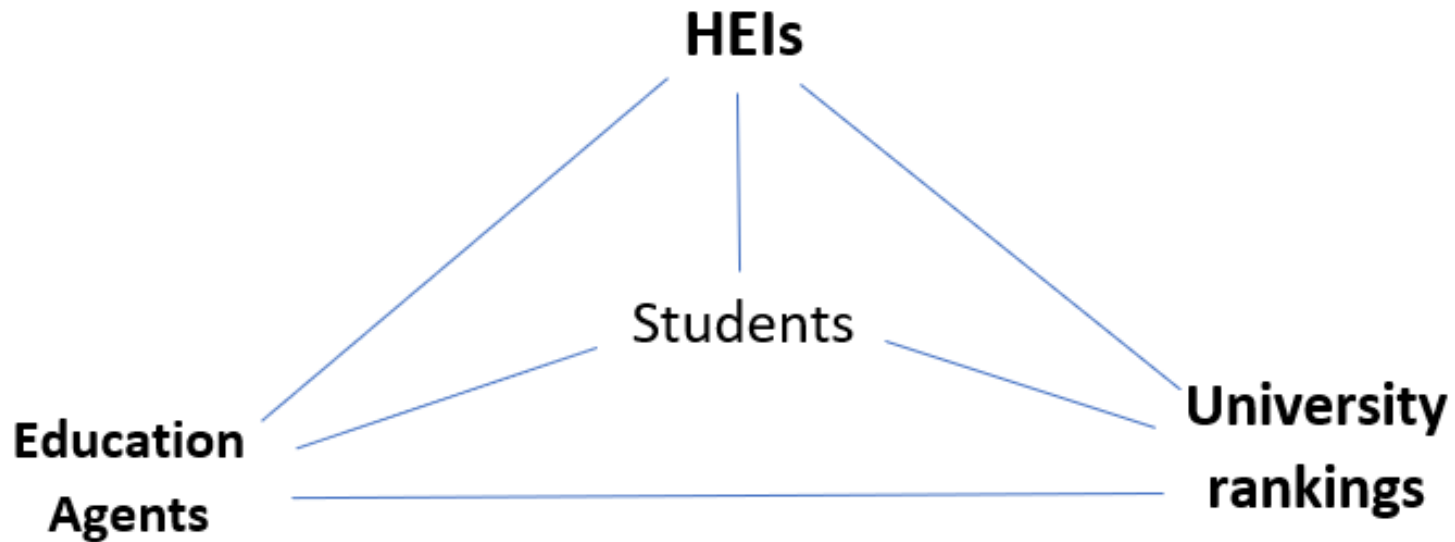


Figure 1. power dynamics amongst key ISM actors

Too powerful:

- Prestigious HEIs
- Education Agents
- Ranking publishers

Relatively powerless

- Students and those who support them financially and emotionally, such as parents/family (despite being “paying customers”)

ISM DEMOCRATIZATION: THE RELATIONAL-CONDUCT PERSPECTIVE

- Over-reliance on education agents
 - Previous research has already noted how individual students were “vulnerable” and had “little control over the application process” (Xu & Miller, 2021, p. 20) because of their “limited knowledge and skills to balance the power dynamics in a relationship with agents” (p. 20).
- The disempowerment of students impinges on their autonomy, even dignity, as rightful owners of their personal development
 - the dignity and integrity of the applicants as students of good faith are undermined fundamentally. Unscrupulous agents create the conditions for such unsavory realities, but the students themselves are at least partially responsible too

- Xu, H., & Miller, T. (2021). International Recruitment in Canadian Higher Education: Factors Influencing Students’ Perceptions and Experiences with Education Agents. *Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale*, 49(2), 17–34.

ISM DEMOCRATIZATION: THE RELATIONAL-CONDUCT PERSPECTIVE

- The education agents' “overpowering” of the students is tied to **university rankings**, which constitute **a key mechanism for producing unevenness of power** within the ISM landscape (Pusser & Marginson, 2013).
- highly ranked universities enjoy significant **power over student-applicants and the education agents** (Yen et al., 2012).
- Conversely, **education agents also leverage would-be international students' intense desire** for admission to these institutions to develop new service offerings to **extract more profits** from them.

- Pusser, B., & Marginson, S. (2013). University Rankings in Critical Perspective. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 84(4), 544–568.
- Yen, D. A., Yang, H.-P. S., & Cappellini, B. (2012). Ranking Gives Power: Relationships between UK Universities and Chinese Agents. *Journal of General Management*, 38(1), 23–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030630701203800102>

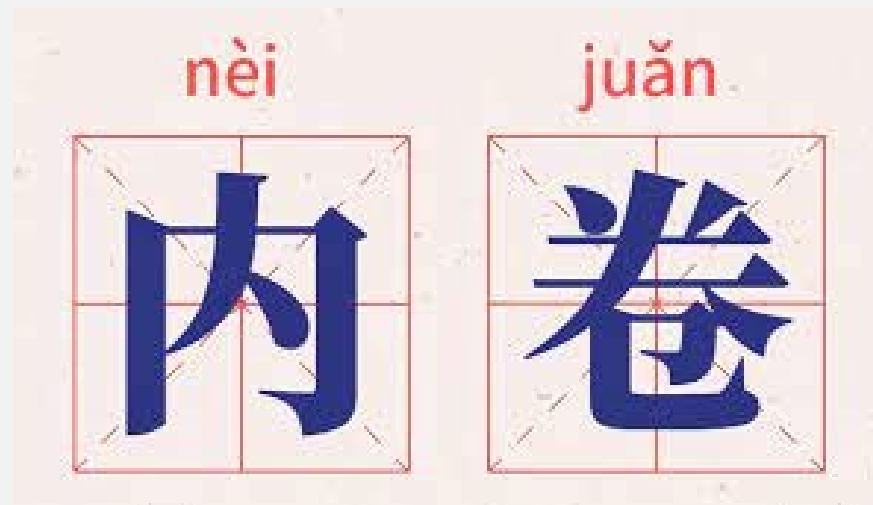
ISM DEMOCRATIZATION: THE RELATIONAL-CONDUCT PERSPECTIVE

Empirical examples from the Chinese study-abroad market:

- “background enhancement” (*beijing tisheng* 背景提升) programmes
- overseas study trips (*haiwai yanxue* 海外研学)
- Intensification / invented acronyms:
 - “G5 universities”
 - “Wang-Man-Ai-Hua” (王曼爱华) universities

ISM DEMOCRATIZATION: THE RELATIONAL-CONDUCT PERSPECTIVE

In the Chinese context, such toxic and unproductive competitive dynamics have even led to the invention of a buzzword, **juan** (short for **neijuan**, or “**involution**”), which refers to a “constant spiraling increase in investment” that does not lead to meaningful development or progress but only to stasis, because everyone else is also engaged in such “an endless, energy-draining loop” (Xiang Biao, quoted in Wang & Ge, 2020).



- Wang, Q., & Ge, S. (2020). *How One Obscure Word Captures Urban China's Unhappiness*. <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006391>

ISM DEMOCRATIZATION: THE RELATIONAL-CONDUCT PERSPECTIVE

- **Transparency**
 - the study-abroad application process becomes more **obscure** and **mysterious** for would-be international students due to the intermediation of the agents
 - It can be argued that the recruiting institutions have a responsibility for making admission more transparent and approachable for prospective students, but the top universities often have little incentive to be responsive to demand, whereas for other institutions, working with agents might be a more cost-effective and pragmatic way of meeting student recruitment targets.
- **Accountability**
 - among major ISM destination countries, only Australia and New Zealand have taken significant steps to monitor and regulate education agents

CONCLUSION: DEMOCRATIZING ISM?

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CONCLUSION: DEMOCRATIZING ISM?

- seen from both perspectives, the democratization of ISM is faced with highly challenging, perhaps pessimistic, prospects.
- **Accessibility perspective:**
 - increasingly differentiated and stratified ISM opportunities and experiences, which threaten to sharpen the relief between “superior” vs “inferior” forms of student mobility, and between “haves” and “have-nots” among international students
 - at the bottom these developments of inequalities and stratification reflect the marketization of international higher education, which subjects the field, including ISM, to the logic of the capitalist market economy.

CONCLUSION: DEMOCRATIZING ISM?

- **Relational-Conduct perspective:**
 - highly uneven power relations,
 - the stripping away of autonomy and even dignity from (would-be) international students,
 - lack of transparency,
 - inadequate accountability, and
 - toxic competitive dynamics that result in unethical and exploitative practices.

CONCLUSION: DEMOCRATIZING ISM?

- Tackling these challenges requires key ISM actors to make radical changes to existing behaviour and entrenched practices, which **not only take them beyond their “comfort zones” but possibly also go against their vested interests.**
- It is hard to see education agents and prestigious HEIs voluntarily give up their powers and influences, at least **international students** (and those behind them) – **currently the disempowered and sometimes exploited actor – should work towards regaining some of the lost autonomy, agency, and dignity.**
- Just as democracy is founded on **the active participation of critically minded and justice-seeking citizens** (Dewey, 1918), international students can be encouraged to develop a **more critical and independent mindset** and **be more willing to “take things into their own hands”**, to make the ISM field more democratic.