

Panel 3: International Mobility and Societal Change: Rethinking Higher Education in a Divided World

Convenor: Maia Chankseliani (University of Oxford, Department of Education)

As the landscape of higher education becomes increasingly fragmented by geopolitical tensions, regional conflicts, and growing inequalities, the transformative potential of international mobility is being re-examined. This panel, drawing on the International Student Mobility and World Development project, addresses the far-reaching impacts of mobility on individuals and societies across diverse contexts. With a critical focus on transnational social relations, democratisation, and decolonisation, the panellists explore how international education shapes both personal agency and collective action. By rethinking the role of higher education in promoting not just academic excellence but societal resilience, this panel highlights how universities can play a broader role in social change.

The five papers presented will investigate how international mobility contributes to societal transformations, particularly in the Global South, where the repercussions of geopolitical shifts are often most acute. Ahmad Akkad explores how transnational social relations create conditions for collective action and resilience in the MENA region. Gardiana Bandeira-Melo examines the divergent impacts of U.S.-funded mobility programmes on African development, offering a comparative lens. Joonghyun Kwak and Maia Chankseliani interrogate the relationship between higher education and democratisation in authoritarian contexts. Natalya Hanley focuses on how intercultural competencies developed through mobility experiences contribute to broader societal change across six global regions. Finally, Zhe Wang reflects on how leaders from South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia redefine university excellence, challenging Eurocentric knowledge systems and advocating for a decolonised higher education model.

Together, these papers provide a multi-layered understanding of how international mobility not only shapes individual careers but also stimulates systemic change in home countries, offering pathways for higher education to serve as a force for social transformation in an increasingly divided world.

The Multiplier Effect: Transnational Social Relations and Collective Action through International Higher Education Mobility

Ahmad Akkad (University of Oxford, Department of Education)

In an era characterised by increasing global insularity and geopolitical tensions, experiences of international mobility serve as a crucial counterforce by fostering transnational social ties among academics and professionals and enhancing their relational capacities, which are essential for societal development. Drawing on the concept of the 'relational subject' (Donati & Archer, 2015), where individuals' agency is

deeply connected with their social context, this study investigates the complex interplay between transnational social relations and societal contributions. The research is based on in-depth interviews with 20 higher education academics and professionals from the MENA region. The findings indicate that transnational social relations cultivate three key relational capacities necessary for enacting societal change at home: (1) Igniting inspiration, where the establishment of transnational social connections inspires innovative ideas and practices that may not have previously existed; (2) Cultural reflexivity, which empowers individuals to critically examine local norms and structures. Participants are perceived to engage in ‘inner conversation’ (Archer, 2000) and deeply evaluate their personal and professional goals, aligning them with the broader needs of their communities; and (3) Coalition-building, which enhances their ability to navigate complex institutional relationships by fostering coalitions and building consensus, thereby mobilising diverse stakeholders around reform initiatives. This paper argues that transnational social relations contribute to societal change through a multiplier effect, enhancing not only individual relational capacities but also enabling others in their home country to forge new social ties, broaden perspectives, and pursue collective action. Collectively, these capacities foster resilience and adaptability, which equip individuals to counteract global insularity and geopolitical challenges within their communities in the MENA region.

Charting African International Mobility in U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Programmes

Gardiana Bandeira-Melo (University of Oxford, Department of Education)

International mobility has been recognised to foster knowledge, professional growth and cultural exchange. Programmes sponsored by the United States Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) have engaged African participants for over half a century, offering professional, educational and cultural opportunities that promise to benefit both individuals and their home countries. Nonetheless, understanding of the broader impact of such programmes on African development remains limited. Also, despite increasing African participation in international mobility, there is little research comparing the overall impact of programmes offered by ECA with those from other mobility programmes. These lacunae limit the ability of African policymakers, educators, practitioners and aspiring participants to assess such initiatives. The proposed study aims to map the journey of African participants in ECA programmes and compare their experiences to those of other African participants involved in mobility schemes using data from the International Mobility and World Development project. It traces activities to assess the extent to which ECA approaches to international mobility in Africa may affect the continent. Data was collected through qualitative interviews with 116 African participants from 12 countries who engaged in cross-nation mobility. Thematic analysis using NVivo was carried out to identify trends and insights into how their trajectories unfold from departure to return. Preliminary results suggest that African international mobility through ECA tends to differ from other programmes in terms of type, duration and content. While ECA and other programmes all enhance individual capacity, namely participants’ skills, networks and capacities to engage in

development initiatives, and drive systemic change, ECA schemes have broader political, economic and cultural ramifications. This paper increases understanding of how ECA schemes in Africa diverge from other international mobility, highlighting both its benefits and challenges and how structural challenges within African countries would best be addressed by local approaches to maximise developmental impact.

Higher Education and Democratisation in Authoritarian Countries

Joonghyun Kwak & Maia Chankseliani (University of Oxford, Department of Education)

This study explores the association between higher education and democratisation in authoritarian regimes, addressing a critical gap in existing scholarship. We explore two key questions: Is the expansion of domestic higher education and international student mobility linked to democratisation in authoritarian countries? How do host countries' political contexts influence the relationship between international higher education and democratisation in students' home countries? Drawing on Biesta's concepts of socialisation and subjectification and the theoretical framework of transnationalism, we analyse cross-national time-series data from 151 countries spanning 1999 to 2018. Our dynamic panel regression models reveal that domestic higher education in authoritarian regimes often reinforces existing political structures, limiting democratic engagement. Conversely, international student mobility, particularly to democratic countries, significantly promotes democratic values upon students' return. The findings highlight the nuanced ways higher education can either support or hinder democratic processes, depending on the political context. The study underscores the importance of strategic support for international educational exchanges and cultivating democratic principles within domestic higher education systems. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in light of the rise of authoritarianism.

International Mobilities, Intercultural Understanding and Societal Transformations

Natalya Hanley (University of Oxford, Department of Education)

International mobility programmes are highly valued for their role in the development of international participants' intercultural competencies, including knowledge, skills, communication and behaviours (Hanley et al., forthcoming; He et al., 2017; Iskhakova & Bradly, 2022). This paper examines the diverse impacts of exposure to a broad range of cultural perspectives during international mobility programmes. It focuses on how transformative learning, which prompts critical reflection on one's cultural assumptions, encourages the integration of new practices (Mezirow, 1997) consequently contributing to the societal transformations in participants' home countries.

Guided by theories focusing on transformational learning, agency formation, and social change (Archer, 2000; Biesta et al., 2014; Deardorff, 2006; Mezirow & Taylor, 2011; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019a), the paper aims to present how meaningful

engagement with diverse cultural contexts abroad enable participants to interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds and fosters positive disposition towards cultural diversity, such as openness, curiosity, and a willingness to engage with other people's perspectives. We specifically focus on various forms of integrations (social and academic), access to global opportunities (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019b) and the role of subjectification in the process by which individuals develop autonomy and critical awareness.

The paper presents primary findings from semi-structured interviews conducted in a comprehensive study involving individual changemakers from 70 countries spread across six regions. The findings suggest that as participants internalise and apply new intercultural knowledge, skills, and insights, they contribute to the evolving of cultural norms and practices within their home societies. The interaction between human agency and cultural systems demonstrates how intercultural competence, cultivated through international mobility, supports both personal transformation and broader societal impact. The study contributes to the existing literature on the unique role of international mobility experiences in shaping participants' intercultural competence and their subsequent contributions to social changes in their home countries.

University Excellence and Decolonising Higher Education: Insights from University Leaders in South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia

Zhe Wang (University of Oxford, Department of Education)

Higher education has become increasingly globalised, with universities worldwide striving to achieve and be recognised for excellence. Traditionally, standards of 'good' universities have been shaped by Eurocentric benchmarks and global ranking systems, emphasising metrics such as research productivity, publication counts, and funding levels. However, these metrics often overlook contextual priorities that resonate within different regions, particularly in the Global South, where universities frequently operate within unique social, economic, and political conditions. In these regions, the purpose and impact of a university extend beyond academic output to encompass community engagement, social equity, and sustainable development goals.

This paper investigates how university leaders from South Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia reflect on the influence of their international mobility experiences, examining how these experiences shape their perspectives on university excellence and its roles in society. Engaging with diverse academic contexts worldwide, these leaders gain insights that provide alternative, contextually grounded visions of institutional success. Bringing knowledge rooted in local priorities, they advocate for university models that act as engines of societal resilience and development. Their reflections reveal emerging models that prioritise societal impact and inclusivity over traditional metrics of academic productivity, thereby broadening the definition of a 'good university.' A lens of 'decolonising' higher education underpins this study, emphasising the need to integrate diverse perspectives and acknowledge the distinctive contributions of the Global South to the global higher education system. By exploring the experiences of internationally mobile university leaders from the Global South, this research

underscores the importance of expanding quality benchmarks to recognise regional relevance, inclusivity, and societal impact.

These findings advocate for policies that support and elevate Global South leadership, encouraging a reimagined global mission for higher education—one that values diversity, equity, and a capacity to address both regional and global challenges.