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Research Brief

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Intra-Africa student mobility from a critical perspective

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Introduction

The study, 'Internationalization and Student Mobility: Exploring the Mobility of Higher Education Students in East Africa' (Amutuhaire, 2024) explored intra-Africa student mobility, an aspect of south-south mobility, using evidence from Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi. Researchers argue that intra-Africa student mobility will strengthen higher education (HE) in Africa and help the continent mitigate challenges such as brain drain and the marginalization of its HE systems (Agbaje, 2023; Sehoole & Lee, 2021; Trines, 2024). However, this view overlooks some contextual factors that shape intra-Africa student mobility. The study explored international student mobility (ISM) in East Africa (a case of intra-Africa student mobility) using theoretical orientations of critical internationalization with a view that internationalization thrives on and propagates inequalities between individuals and social systems (Buckner & Stein, 2020; George Mwangi et al., 2018).

Brooks and Waters (2011) argue that "ISM is never a neutral act or something that just happens; rather, it is filled with social, cultural, and political meaning. It is therefore a worthy subject of investigation" (p. 130). The study explored the following research questions in line with this position: (i) How do HE systems in international students' sending and receiving countries affect ISM in East Africa? (ii) How does social class privilege influence ISM in East Africa? (iii) How do immigration policies affect international students in East Africa? Uganda is reportedly the East African country with the most international students, mainly from Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan, Rwanda, and Burundi (ICEF Monitor, 2017). Therefore, it was considered the 'receiving country' and the main focus of the study. Countries from which Uganda's international students come, i.e., the 'sending countries,' were represented by Rwanda and Burundi.

I collected quantitative data from international students at Uganda's Makerere University (MU) and Kampala International University (KIU) using self-administered email questionnaires. I also interviewed international students in Uganda, staff in charge of international students' offices and HE councils, and an immigration officer in Uganda. Quantitative data analysis used the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) to generate descriptive and inferential statistics, including percentages, means, standard deviations, and Chi-Square tests, which were used to explore the study variables. Qualitative data was analyzed through Thematic Analysis to develop summary statements and representative quotes to make sense of the data.

Study Findings

Through analysis of quantitative and qualitative data pertinent to the first research question, the study reports that the East African countries that send international students to Uganda are characterized by:

- High tuition fees and other education costs
- Universities with a low reputation in terms of global and regional rankings
- Universities with few academic programs
- Limited opportunities to improve English Language proficiency

The HE system in Uganda (the receiving country) was characterized by:

- Lower educational costs
- Universities with an international reputation
- A variety of academic programs from which international students can choose
- Academic programs offered in English

These attributes influenced Uganda's inbound student mobility. Seventy-five percent of the respondents held that the low-quality HE in their home countries instigated their outbound mobility. When cross-validated, over 80% of the respondents indicated that studying in Uganda enabled them to attain their dream education.

These findings point to arguments in support of internationalization, depicting it as being entirely beneficial without pointing out the critical issues that inform the status quo and conceal that:

- Lower tuition rates in Ugandan universities are a strategy to attract more international students, as claimed by ICEF Monitor (2017), which considers Ugandan universities as aggressive recruiters of international students.
- The absence of reputable universities stems from colonization, whereby the colonialists entrenched Uganda as East Africa's education center by establishing MU in Uganda as early as 1921 (Chacha, 2023). Comparable developments in Rwanda, Burundi, and DRC only came after the 1960s. Consequently, such HE systems in these countries are still developing.
- Uganda inherited English from its British colonizers, which put it in an advantaged position (considering the hegemony of the English language in HE) compared to its francophone neighboring countries.

Thus, ISM in the countries considered in this study thrives on historical inequalities arising from coloniality and continues to sustain the same disparities. It is, therefore, not different from the south-to-north mobility in which students move from weaker to more robust education systems. Moreover, ISM is a source of revenue to support East Africa's underfunded HE sector, hence assigning mutual benefit from ISM a low priority.

For the second research question, students' social class was determined based on an average index of their parents' income and levels of education. Most international students (59%) were in the high social class, with only 9.2% in the lower social class. Interview data supported these findings and indicated that participation in ISM mainly favors students from the higher social class. It also clarified that households use ISM to perpetuate their social class. Further, interviewees also indicated that, through struggle, some lower social classes participate in ISM to transcend their

social class positioning. Expanding ISM opportunities to benefit more students from the lower social class is essential.

Regarding the third research question, the student visa ('student pass') was international students' most common residence document. Further, 91% of the sampled international students were not employed, with 82% indicating that it was difficult to get jobs. While several challenges limit international students from accessing jobs in Uganda, the main challenge was the immigration policies that exclude international students from employment, i.e., a student's pass holder has no employment rights. An international student must change the residence document from a student pass to a costly work permit. This shows that ISM in East Africa is shaped by other factors rather than the search for jobs. However, some international students indicated they need jobs to gain hands-on international work experience and enrich their CVs; denying them a right to work limits their benefits of participation in ISM. Therefore, while Uganda aims to attract international students, these students are still treated with disdain. However, I acknowledge the employment situation in Uganda, where many educated nationals have no employment. Formulating a policy enforcing the employment of international students when there are unemployed citizens is unattainable.

The study concluded that:

1. The historical reputation of some universities in East Africa, which is not necessarily linked to quality education, informs the region's ISM trends.
2. Internationalization and ISM in the countries considered are responses to market forces, with the primary purpose being maximizing economic gains rather than improving service delivery.
3. ISM mainly intends to reproduce social class, which has sustained social inequalities and cultural barriers, rather than undoing them. However, students can also use it to transcend the socioeconomic ladder.
4. The search for jobs does not incentivize participation in ISM since the immigration policies in East Africa exclude international students from employment.

This study contributes to the growing research on critical internationalization scholarship by revealing the commercial orientations and inequalities that inform ISM in East Africa. Intra-Africa mobility is influenced by competition to attract international students as a source of institutional revenues, as is usually the case with south-to-north ISM. Thus, intra-Africa mobility must be revisited to deliver more of the anticipated benefits.

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