International Student Mobility: the Role of Social Networks

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Abstract

Building upon recent work on higher education mobility, this paper contends that social networks of friendship and kinship are critical determinants for students deciding to study overseas, not just, as has hitherto been suggested, a complementary factor. It uses original data collected through interviews and focus groups with thirty-eight higher education international students studying at three UK universities and argues that students who choose to study overseas do not operate within a vacuum but rather draw upon extended networks of individuals who have chosen to do so themselves or advocate studying abroad. While this encouragement may be of an explicit and unequivocal nature – telling students that they ought to study overseas – for the majority it is rather more implicit. The students interviewed invariably related that higher education overseas or mobility more generally was an accepted practice amongst their peers, thereby leading to a normalisation of the mobility process. The paper concludes that international students come to accept mobility as a taken for granted stage within the lifecourse, and, whether intentionally or not, this is often the driving force behind their decision to study overseas.

Introduction

The past six years has witnessed an explosion in the study of international student mobility. The work of, amongst others, Brooks and Waters (2011, 2010, 2009; see also Waters and Brooks 2011), Leung (2013) and Collins (2009, 2008a, 2008b) have been vital to this

emergent understanding. Their studies of, *inter alia*, employability and the building of social and cultural capital have advanced the field at pace. However, hitherto, considerations of *how* students make the decision to study overseas, and in particular how they mobilise their social networks in so doing, are underdeveloped. While past research has asserted that patterns of mobility are often shaped by the relationships between people (Brooks and Waters 2010; Szelényi 2006), we know little about how international students utilise these networks or their effects. The notable exception is Collins' study of Korean students studying in Auckland, but this focuses on the role of education agents and immigrant entrepreneurs as being "bridges to learning" in facilitating the movement of international students (2008b, pp.399) rather than on social networks per se. This paper, by point of departure, shows that these relationships are key to determining whether mobility *actually takes place*. It asserts that these social networks directly shape the geographies of international students by detailing how they are part of complex communities already in motion without which both shape their decision to study abroad and their place of study. In contrast to Brooks and Waters (2010), it looks at students engaging both in mobility from Western countries and mobility from the East to the West. This paper therefore represents the first dedicated, systematic analysis of these dynamics. In so doing, it does not contend that social networks are the only influence on mobility. As the international student mobility literature shows, they are influenced by an array of different factors such as the financial and cultural implications, their intended career paths and even their understandings of place (see Beech 2014). My point is that without the social networks implicated in this mobility few would choose to move in order to pursue higher education overseas. The paper thus represents a significant shift from the emphasis of previous studies that have acknowledged the role of networks in shaping geographies of mobility, to one that shows that these networks are a determining factor regarding whether it takes place at all.

After offering a theorisation of social networks and detailing the methodological approach, the paper is divided into four sections. The first ('Choosing overseas study: much More than the instrumental') unpacks the way in which the recent international student

mobility literature conceptualises the way in which students choose to study overseas. The second ('Social networks as offering advice and encouragement') explores how international students actively seek information on overseas education. The third section ('Sharing the lived experience') considers how the influence of social networks is more subtle and implicit. Before the conclusion, the final analysis section ('Establishing cultures of mobility') builds upon the two previous by reflecting on how traditions of mobility are replicated by social networks.

Theorising Social Networks in Student Mobility

Such is the influence of Manuel Castells and Bruno Latour that it is now something of a truism amongst geographers that all people and things are networked. But in thinking about mobility, it is important to note that social networks are both distinctive and have particular functions in generating mobilities. Indeed, as Cresswell (2006; 2011) suggests, in contrast to a past which was characterised by fixity and boundedness, much recent work now *starts* from the premise of motion, that nothing exists in a pre-mobile state but due to connections in the network all is already in a state of flux and movement. But social networks are not reducible to the actor (or, properly, actant) network, rather the emphasis is exclusively on the relationships and links between individuals, groups, organizations. Social networks are conceptually and intellectually distinctive. As Manderscheid has recently put it

> people's movements are about social relationships, forming and maintaining social networks of various kinds with places and people who are not necessarily proximate, such as family members and relatives, friends and partners, employers and work colleagues, institutions and services (2014: 189).

Social networks, therefore, are at once structures (and structuring agents) *and* constantly coming into being, with new connections changing the structure and dynamics of the network. At the level of the individual, so it follows, the nature of the network frames their mobility (Urry 2007). As Urry (2003) suggests, social networks put the social world into motion through the making of new connections, through travel, and ultimately through (as

broadly conceived) talk. Moreover, as Granovetter (2005) asserts, it is through such social networks that individuals learn about the accepted norms of behaviour in the world around them and how to act in different situations.

From this conceptual position, the social networks referred to in this paper can be understood as comprising distinct sets of actors who interact and communicate with one another, sharing resources and information in the process (Butts 2008; Webster and Morrison 2004). And in the case of international students, and those researched here in particular, the framing of their network has predisposed them towards overseas study. This is not to say that others are immobile, or that before becoming an international student the respondents were pre-mobile, rather it is to say that the nature of their network shapes them and facilitates their mobility in particular ways, taking them bodily out of their existing locale and putting them 'overseas'. Nor is this to impart decision-making powers to the network itself. Social networks enable and encourage (or discourage) the individual (or group), the power manifested in the different connections enabling and encouraging differentially (Bruggeman 2013 p.62), but do not determine and decide in themselves. As this paper goes on to show, the nature of the social network can lead to the development of cultures of mobility, as the individual networks of students choosing to study overseas overlap and become mutually-reinforcing and self-perpetuating, something akin to other established networks of migration (Boyd 1989; Massey et al. 1993). Moreover, as Conradson and Latham have asserted in a different context, as a result of such embeddedness in wider networks, mobility for many individuals becomes a "taken-for-granted part of the lifecycle" (2005:228).

It also follows that the growth of international student numbers has led to the creation and thickening of complex networks of sojourners, the social structures so created acting as conduits for the spread of information between those who have gone overseas previously and those who are considering this form of mobility (Goodreau *et al.* 2009; Massey *et al.* 1993). This information provides a gateway for potential movers to develop preconceived notions regarding overseas study and their likely experience when abroad. It is

argued here that these social networks lead to the normalisation of the travel process as international students inform others of the skills and experiences they acquired when away from home. The availability of communication technologies and, more recently, the growing popularity of social networking websites has enabled students to maintain relationships with those at home or elsewhere when overseas much more easily than in the past (Urry 2003; Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007; Blunt 2007). This travelling-in-dwelling (see Clarke 2005) allows international students to share their experiences with those people who are geographically dispersed through photographs, anecdotes and so on, creating shared ideas of the international student experience.

With this in mind, the social networks detailed and discussed here are highly diverse in their nature, some are formed of family and friends whilst others are not. To draw upon what follows, some of the respondents for this study noted that they knew few other people who had studied abroad before, such as Aimee (a masters student from Canada). She explains that instead she actively sought out other key informants which she thought would be able to offer her relevant advice for people wishing to pursue a career in her field of interest. Thus while her existing network had consciously or unconsciously planted the idea of overseas study in her mind, Aimee needed deeper reassurance about her mobility and thus extended her social network to do so. In contrast, and typically, other students have much deeper-rooted networks around them of people who have studied or lived overseas. Rafiah who came from Trinidad and Tobago noted that many people aspired to studying abroad and she discussed how she considered the UK to be a 'glitzy' option for study. This is partly from seeing those around her make the decision to study there, it is also partly in relation to her father's work which involved considerable travel, but is also a result of a colonial legacy which links the Caribbean with the UK – a long established and enduring relationship, which Madge *et al.* (2009) suggested provides key routes along which international student mobility often takes place. The fact that the networks are diverse in nature is in itself not an issue – what is important is that irrespective of this diversity each is key to facilitating and encouraging mobility.

The expansion and importance of these networks is in no small part related to the development of globalisation which has led to greater interconnections between people and countries. Urry (2007) states that this developed into a mobilities paradigm characterised by a greater diversity in the connections between people. He suggests that this has led to relationships which span ever greater distances and therefore feature physical movement, whilst also maintaining an emotional intensity associated with geographically closer relationships. Vertovec (2009) observes that this is in part facilitated by easy access to relatively cheap communication technologies for the masses. He notes that this first came in the form of cheaper rates for international telephone calls during the 1990s and up until the time of writing combined with improvements in long-distance telephone networks. However, as noted above, social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter add additional dimensions to this. As Steinfield, Ellison and Lampe (2008) suggest, these sites where users can accumulate vast numbers of friends and followers provide the ideal conditions to act as bridges for social capital, along which information about different destinations or the positives and negatives for and against student mobility can proceed. While stronger ties such as close friends and family will have an enduring impact on the decisions made by others within a network, so Granovetter (1973) asserts, it is the weaker ties which act as bridges between clusters of friendship groups allowing information to diffuse more effectively through and across a greater range of people. The influence of social networks on prospective international students therefore has a two-pronged influence – both in terms of stronger ties and often knowing family and friends who have also been or currently are mobile, as well as in terms of these weaker ties which students also rely on when considering their final study destination. Both of these provide access to key forms of social capital which support mobility. I propose that these stronger and weaker ties influence international students differently – stronger ties appear to plant the seeds for an international education, while it is the weaker ties which often provide the key information central to their final decision making process.

Choosing Overseas Study: Much More than the Instrumental

Research into international student mobility has indicated that there can be multiple reasons for students to engage in overseas study, a truism that has been supported by this research as well. On a short term scale, schemes such as the Erasmus programme (see Deakin 2012), or private partnerships between universities are often perceived to yield a number of benefits including foreign language proficiency, personal development, or enriched academic knowledge as students are exposed to new concepts and research methods (Messer and Wolter 2006; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Murphy-Lejeune 2002). Indeed, many participants noted that studying in the UK gave them the opportunity to improve their English language skills, while the perceived multicultural experience would allow them to become skilled in cross-cultural communication, leading, so they desired, to greater tolerance and understanding (Brooks and Waters 2011; Brown 2009; Adler 1975). However, for those who choose to carry out the whole of their degree overseas the motivations for doing so are often much more complex and their choice may be influenced by the sheer cost of the higher education system, particularly if coming from outside of the EU to the UK. Study overseas can therefore represent a financial burden, alongside the emotional costs of moving to, what can be, a very different cultural lifestyle.

Recent research into international student mobility has tended to focus upon the role of gaining a superior degree and developing a range of different social and cultural capital which would otherwise not have been available to them in their home country. Indeed, Guth and Gill (2008) proposed that for many international students, mobility is conceived as providing opportunities to gain a 'better' degree than would otherwise be available in their home countries, which are often unable to invest as much money in research and development. Infrastructure and availability of courses was, indeed, a factor which several of the international student participants noted in this study, effectively forcing them out of the higher education system in their home countries. However, improvements in the education systems in home countries will not necessarily lead to a diminished interest in studying

overseas. Waters (2009) suggests that as the higher education infrastructure improves in many Asian countries middle class families often continue to opt for an education abroad. The implication being that by having a degree of a qualitatively different nature to those who have remained behind social differences will be maintained (see also Findlay *et al*. 2012).

This concept of scarcity alludes to a second key motivation for conducting education away from home: that geographic mobility is in and of itself a form of capital, immediately transferable to economic capital as international student graduates enter into the labour market (Leung 2013; Brooks and Waters 2011). Travelling and spending time abroad is considered as providing opportunities to create new identities and experiences through self-discovery (Bagnoli 2009). Nonetheless, past studies have continued to view this through the frame of the economic opportunities it represents, by considering an overseas education as one of the key steps towards the fulfilment of strategic career goals, with evidence suggesting that the students in question will often make their decision on the basis of how it will affect their career prospects rather than following their personal interests (Brooks and Waters 2011; Waters 2003). Students therefore believe that the softer skills obtained as well, such as the networks established, language skills gained and improved intercultural communication skills are equally important to prospective employers. Indeed, these kinds of cultural capital are also considered to play a key role in procuring work when they enter into the job market (King 2011). Obtaining an international education may therefore be considered by students as a way of gaining access to new forms of capital, and in so doing improving their job prospects and enhancing social difference (Findlay et al. 2012; Holloway *et al*. 2012; see also Baxter and Britton 2001).

Despite the recognition of these soft skills, Carlson (2013) contends that there is a need to move from motivations which have an economic focus to instead consider how students become mobile over time. This is true of this study as the evidence collected suggested that the decision to study overseas was one that students came to gradually as they observed traditions of overseas mobility unfold before them. This parallels work by Brooks (2005) on domestic student decision-making which recognised that a young person's peer group and

their family are the most common sources of influence on their decisions regarding higher education. Brooks contends that students' families tend to shape their overall attitudes to higher education, while students will simultaneously position themselves relative to their friends and peers when choosing where to study. As the following two sections will explore, the social networks of potential international students are integral to their decision to study overseas. This is both in terms of the explicit advice and encouragement that they offer to prospective students, but also in terms of the wider cultural acceptance of study overseas as a normalised stage in the life-course. However, in contrast to Brooks' (2005) findings, students are often keen to distance their family's role in their decision of where to study.

Approach and Method

The research featured in this paper was part of a wider project identifying the factors influencing international students in their decision to study abroad. This paper analyses data collected from semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted at three UK universities (the University of Aberdeen, the University of Nottingham and Queen's University Belfast) with thirty-eight international students from twenty-three different countries between March 2011 and February 2012. The selection of these three subject universities was intentional. During academic year 2010-11 just over 24 per cent of students at the University of Aberdeen and the University of Nottingham were non-UK domiciled. In contrast, at Queen's University Belfast only 10.35 per cent of the students were classified in this way and the international student community had experienced limited growth in the ten years previous (HESA 2013). The research aimed, therefore, to compare two universities which had been considerably more successful at recruiting international students with one which had not. All of the universities were located outside of London due to fears that the students' preference for choosing these universities would be skewed too much by location. Equally, the Oxbridge universities were also excluded because of the likely influence that their reputation would have on student choice.

The only prerequisite was that the students were currently engaged in a degree-seeking programme of study away from their home country. Students taking part in a short-term study abroad programme, such as Erasmus, were therefore excluded, as were those of British nationality but were expatriates living overseas prior to their decision to study in the UK. The study therefore incorporates students from countries which have a robust higher education infrastructure of their own (like the USA and Canada) and those where access to tertiary education can be more limited (like India, Bangladesh and Nigeria). It also features students at all stages of the higher education system, from undergraduate through to PhD, who were from a range of educational disciplines. Included in the study were participants both from outside of the EU as well as from member states, though this latter group comprised only 16 per cent of participants.

The students were not chosen on the basis of their socio-economic background, however, Brooks and Waters (2011) state that the elites and newly emerging middle classes are most likely to engage in international mobility in the pursuit of new cultural capital. Indeed, it is the case that higher education in the UK for those coming from outside of the EU can be prohibitively expensive as universities are able to set their own fee levels for these students. My respondents were therefore self-selecting and represented, for the most part, socio-economic elites who would have had access to the necessary finances to engage in overseas education. This is not to say, however, that they were not cash-limited, as many had made the decision not to study in certain places, like London, because of the associated living costs. Likewise, they often cited choosing these particular universities as they offered good value for money in comparison to others that they had considered. Some were in receipt of scholarships and this had, on occasion, influenced where they ultimately decided to study and also what they intended to do following graduation. For example, some had to return home on graduation as this was stipulated as a requirement in funding received from their home countries.

Analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts revealed a complexity to international student decision-making which has only received limited recognition (see

Carlson 2013). Echoing the international student mobility literature they showed that students were influenced by various different instrumental factors such as the reputation of the UK higher education system, the spoken language of the university, the course or programme, their job prospects on graduation, or deficiencies within the higher education infrastructure in their home countries (see for example: Messer and Wolter 2006; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Murphy-Lejeune 2002). The data also revealed, however, that these often work in tandem with other factors such as the influence of their social networks of friendship and kinship, the critical focus of this paper.

Necessarily, in the context of the UK, international student mobility has been influenced by the recent visa reforms which occurred subsequent to this research being undertaken, especially the ending of the Post Study Work Visa in April of 2012. This visa granted international graduates from UK universities the opportunity to remain for two years for work (see Mavroudi and Warren 2013) and was highly popular. Furthermore the wider reform of UK immigration policy and the development of the points-based system does also appear to have had a significant impact on international student recruitment, particularly for students from India and Pakistan. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) indicates a decline in the number of international students coming from these countries since academic year 2011/12 when first year enrolments fell by 31.89% for Indian student and 21.6% for those from Pakistan (HESA 2014). These changes do not, however, affect the validity of this research. This paper will show that the influence of international student networks transcends these reforms, stimulating a shared culture of being a mobile student.

Social Networks as Offering Advice and Encouragement

Evidence from the research indicated that prospective international students actively sought information and advice from those around them when they were considering study overseas. This advice could either be sought before having made the ultimate decision to go abroad, or when the students were seeking reassurance having decided that study abroad was their

preferred choice. The students discussed how they spoke to a wide range of actors, including friends and family members as well as people in positions of trust or authority, such as their teachers or lecturers (see also Fawcett 1989). The interviewees demonstrated that these informants often reinstated the benefits of overseas study. Coming from Canada, Aimee had personally known few other people who had studied abroad for the whole of their degree. Those who had done so often went to the USA on obtaining sports scholarships, but Aimee felt that this was not comparable to her choosing to leave Canada to study in Scotland. She wanted reassurance that going overseas would have positive benefits for her future career. When those who were working in her specialism suggested that by studying on an international basis she would be differentiating herself from others who had chosen to remain behind, likely improving her overall job prospects, Aimee felt assured that the right decision was to leave:

> **Aimee:** …going abroad was something new and different…I had the opportunity to talk to people in the field and they said…this degree…has [a] different feel to it because it's international and you might have a leg up in the career world. So that… influenced coming abroad. *[Canada, masters student, Aberdeen]*

Aimee's testimony not only demonstrates the importance of social networks in her decision to go overseas, but also highlights the perception that engaging in overseas study will lead to the creation of social and cultural capital which can be transferred to economic capital on returning home (Holloway *et al.* 2012; Findlay et al. 2012; Brooks and Waters 2011).

There was also evidence that engaging in face-to-face contact with those who are offering the advice is not a direct requirement for the information given to be considered trustworthy. Indeed, some of the participants noted that they used social networking sites, such as Facebook, in an attempt to contact other international students at their chosen university. For instance Subash and Sachin, both from India, stated that they had posted messages on Facebook, searching for students who could offer them advice about the

university. This resonates with recent work that suggests while widespread use of the Internet has made the linkages between individuals more ephemeral in nature, such as in these cases, the relationships formed may have long term consequences (Spencer and Pahl 2006). The Internet has widened networks and helped to maintain social connections that would otherwise have disappeared or which may not even have developed at all, allowing users to form relationships with other people who have similar interests (Collins 2009; Ellison *et al.* 2007). As a consequence, it is easier to both maintain contact with others within a network and share information about different destinations amongst widening social circles (Collins 2008b; Clarke 2005).

However, Sachin and Subash show that not only do social networking sites provide information through pre-established relationships but, on occasion, students will actively seek new contacts who can offer them advice and support with regards to studying abroad. This indicates the importance of these new social networking technologies in terms of prospective international students choosing where to study and shows how the shared experience of international (or at times local) students already in residence at the university, in the city, or even elsewhere, can therefore be enough to make them understood as reliable informants. Indeed, the research also identified chance encounters with students already at the university who were able to 'sell' it to other prospective students as also being of key importance. One Malaysian student, Lily, noted that meeting a student who was already studying medicine during an interview day was enough to make her consider the university as her "top" choice.

The students involved in the process therefore take the advice of individuals, not solely on the basis of their *shared* connections or on the strength of their relationship to one another, but due to their shared experience. This confirms Granovetter's (1973) weak ties theory as it demonstrates that those with whom one is less familiar actually provide key information through the network. Of course close bonds together with frequent interaction and intimacy lead to a mutual relationship between the persons involved, and this causes the advice and opinions of family and close kin to have an enduring impact on the decisions

made by others in the network (Levin and Cross 2004; Walker, Wasserman and Wellman 1994; Granovetter 1973), such as those relating to matters of mobility. However, this research shows the importance of those weak ties. Even if only meeting on a single occasion, or never at all face-to-face students often turn to these individuals when seeking advice as they consider them to be key informants in the matter. The participants rarely stated that family members were a direct influence on their choice, with some attempting to actively distance themselves from the role their family and friends had in their choosing to pursue an international education. Song, for instance, was determined to assert that the decision to go abroad was hers and made on her own terms:

> **Song:** …when [my father-in-law] heard my story, he recall his own story and he encourage me that no matter what university you should go to the UK. So that is a minor concern at that time…he call me every day and tell me, "ah, you should consider what I tell you." [*Taiwan, PhD student, Nottingham]*

Likewise, Lily, a Malaysian student, was also eager to assert that the decision to live in the UK was one that she had made herself. She said that one day, while driving with her father, he asked her what she wanted to do now that her exams were finished. Her response was that she wanted to go to London, a week later she was in the UK and had subsequently decided to study towards her undergraduate degree there. Both of these cases seem to suggest that their relatives were *involved* in their decision – indeed it is highly likely that their family provide them with some form of financial and emotional support – and yet each of the women is keen to assert that they were the driving force behind it. The students were eager to convey that this was individual, thus reiterating social perspectives that to study abroad is something which is student-driven and individualistic, a way of forging their own biographies by building knowledge and understanding (Baxter and Britton 2001). This is not to say that the students were not supported by their family financially but rather that they were also keen to draw on the perceptions of study abroad and travel as being an

individualised process – both these women were also keen to escape received notions of the 'place' of women in their home countries as well.

The following section, however, will complicate this received understanding, as it demonstrates that all students are united by implicit 'encouragement' to become mobile as they witness the experience of others who have gone overseas for study, work or travel. Close attention to the complexities and nuances of the transcripts shows that this is much more influential amongst students in their decision to study overseas than many realise. In reflecting on all of these factors and influences it is, of course, important to note that the universities themselves clearly have a role to play in this decision making process. This is both in terms of the subject requirements, but also in terms of IELTs testing or other standardised tests. A number of students noted that they chose the particular university, in part, because of these associated requirements (or lack of). Equally, of course, while students may apply to a university, there is no guarantee that they will be accepted into their first choice institution, however almost all the participants had been accepted into universities of their first or second choice. Only one student from Taiwan, Song, noted that she had applied to twenty-nine universities, so great was her desire to study overseas. This was in part due to problems with application deadlines and issues relating to the requirements of her scholarship which necessitated that she had accepted an offer to a university by a given time. Nonetheless, despite the control that universities may exert upon a student's final destination, the role of social networks transcend this. While students may be limited in terms of where they eventually study, it is their social networks that instil within them a desire to do so at all, Song's case is an example of this, seeing her husband and father-in-law choose to study abroad and the benefits that they had reaped as a result was central to her desire to do so herself.

Sharing the Lived Experience

More commonly the influence of these social networks is rather more implicit in nature. While the interviewees did often mention that members of these networks explicitly told

them that they should study overseas, the majority discussed, instead, apparent embedded cultures of student mobility (see Brooks and Waters 2010). These embedded cultures demonstrated that the participants involved in the network have become accustomed to overseas study or travel from an early age or through the experiences of those around them. This could involve family members and friends who had previously or were currently engaged in student mobility, as well as highlighting more widespread cultures of overseas study throughout their communities. Unlike those who actively sought reassurance or advice, the sharing of these lived experiences tends to occur long before students have made the decision to study overseas. In these shared cultures, the students would often indicate that "everyone" studied overseas, frequently choosing the same destinations – primarily the UK and the USA (see Adnett 2010; Baruch *et al.* 2007; Brown *et al.* 2010), but also Australia, Canada and Germany. The interviewees would describe 'traditions' of going abroad amongst school leavers, friends and family members in their home countries – in other words directly implicating their social networks in their mobility. As Asan, a Nepalese student, said, "95 per cent of people from [his] school" went abroad. While his case is of course not representative of all Nepalese young people, it does echo work by Brooks and Waters (2010) which suggested that the influence of friends and family upon international students was generally implicit in nature, manifesting itself in the normalisation of travelling and spending time overseas. As Asan's quotation demonstrates, he is influenced not necessarily by people telling him that he should study overseas but because within his school study abroad has become normalised. This shows how the concept of overseas study has entered into the popular imagination. In many cases, the respondents have always wanted to travel and are influenced by the friends and family that have done so before (O'Reilly 2006).

It is therefore the lived experiences of their social networks which can provide the impetus for travel. In these cases the individuals involved are not necessarily sharing advice and encouragement through the spoken word, rather they are encouraging others through the creation of shared imaginings of the overall experience. As Clarke (2005) suggests, those who choose a gap year abroad engage in travelling-in-dwelling while away, through

contacting friends and family or on returning home, through photographs, scrapbooks and souvenirs. It can be assumed that international students, who also spend an extended period of time overseas, engage in similar activities, sharing their experiences with friends and family at home, without explicitly encouraging others to study abroad. It is this implicit information, disseminated over long periods of time, that creates social structures regarding what it means to be an international student and the benefits that it will bring to the actors involved.

This research shows that international students can, and do, contact other people who have studied overseas, prior to making the decision to do so themselves. In her focus group, Priya, an Indian student, observed that knowing people within her social networks who had studied abroad influenced her in her decision to come to the UK. While these connections did not necessarily take her to any particular university, or even to a particular place – she stated that she knew of people who had studied in the UK, the USA and Singapore – this helped her to come to the realisation that if they had been able to leave home for study, so could she. It was the *experience* of these contacts that gave her the courage to make the final decision and go abroad, rather than the explicit advice and encouragement that they offered her.

For other students, the connection to specific universities was stronger. One particular example involves an Indian student, Suren. He had many friends who had chosen to study abroad and one of their preferred destinations was the UK. This in turn had created for him a 'brand awareness' of the UK higher education system, based on the experience of his friends when at university and the subsequent good fortune that they had. Suren stated that one particular friend had chosen to study at the University of Cambridge. Having completed his PhD he had then gone on to obtain a postdoctoral fellowship. Suren's friend had a positive experience of university life in the UK, but much more than that he played a fundamental role in developing Suren's perceptions of a UK higher education system. When choosing where to study he recalled his friend's experience and used it as a basis for what his own experience would be, thus influencing his decision to study overseas. Potential students

are therefore able to feed off the experiences of their networks. This led several students to note that it was not only the education that their social networks had received when they were away, but also the overall experience, and the associated soft skills that they obtained, as evidenced by Marianna, a Greek student:

> **Marianna:** …I had a friend who had studied…in UK before and …the experiences and everything [make it] worthwhile to come here, and of course it's the education that plays the most important role. I mean it's different. *[Greece, masters student, Nottingham]*

This seeking of additional benefits suggests that the attraction of studying overseas is not limited to the associated academic gains, but is multifaceted in nature. A sojourn abroad is conceived by students as a period of self-discovery and development, creating their own biographies, apart from those which are dictated by their culture and family (Conradson and Latham 2005) – something which Brown et al. (2010) also detailed with regards to international students' food experiences. This is reflected by evidence that some students, such as Elena from Kazakhstan experienced envy and feelings of jealousy when witnessing others who are able to leave home and live a "new life" elsewhere:

> **Elena:** …there were…two girls who went…to America…I was kind of jealous 'cause I really wanted to be somewhere as well…because they were experiencing American life and I wanted to…experience the new life… *[Kazakhstan, undergraduate student, Belfast]*

This is closely related to work by Holloway *et al.* (2012) which cited gender bias against women in Kazakhstan as being a key motivating factor to leave home. Elena discussed at length the various freedoms she had gained by choosing a UK education, with no chance of becoming the subject of local gossip, as would have been the case had she remained in Kazakhstan.

However, there were many cases in which students were unable to draw on the experiences of those who had studied abroad in the past. This was especially the case for students engaging in horizontal mobility between countries of similar economic standing (Teichler 2003). This research highlighted a number of students who had come from North America to study in the UK who drew attention to the fact that at home they had very little contact with other people who had studied overseas for the duration of their degrees, as detailed in the quotation from Aimee earlier. For these students, the international social networks and traditions of mobility for education are simply not as well developed, however, Brooks and Waters (2009) assert that there is now evidence of greater horizontal mobility occurring. Instead, one of the key reasons they cite for choosing to study abroad is to differentiate themselves from those who had chosen to remain at home in terms of the social and cultural capital gained (Findlay et al. 2012; Brooks and Waters 2011).

> **Madeline:** … I only knew one other person who had actually done a full degree abroad, so for me…there's…a difference between doing the term abroad in your undergraduate and doing your actual full out programme, because…study abroad in the States is kind of a big thing, lots of people are doing it…But yeah to go somewhere else for your full degree was something different and I didn't really know a lot of people who had done that. *[USA, masters student, Aberdeen]*

However, despite these weaker networks, this research demonstrates that as with students engaging in vertical mobility to places where they believe they will obtain a superior education (Teichler 2003), their decision to become mobile was often based on the experiences of those around them[1]. Despite not necessarily knowing other people who had

[1] It is important to note that all of the students involved in this research had made a conscious decision to study overseas. There are, of course, issues with the definition of vertical and horizontal mobility, especially as countries which are considered key sending countries develop their own higher education infrastructure. China for example now has many world class universities, blurring the lines between horizontal and vertical mobility. This has been complimented by recent work by Waters and Leung (2013) on the value of various 'top-up' programmes, where students study in their home country, and a home university, but receive a British education and the perception that these represent their failure in the education system. Likewise, students from the UK or

engaged in an overseas education, many eluded to some kind of international 'experience', establishing within them ideals of spending time abroad or living overseas. This differentiates them from their peers who have chosen to study in their home countries, seemingly making them more open to going abroad. Madeline, for example, had spent much of her childhood living in Scotland, so she had an established connection to the region in advance of choosing to study there. Likewise, Aimee had family living in England, and she felt this made her decision to go to the UK not so unusual.

When prospective international students did not have such strong connections to a particular place, to make up for the absence of networks, they would instead compare their experience to other friends who had spent time overseas. Hazel, a student from the USA, noted while she had known of few people that studied overseas for the duration of their degree, she knew of many that had spent time travelling around Europe. Exposure to the experiences of her friends who had spent an extended period of time overseas made her eager to do the same, although with a greater educational focus. Hazel did not believe that this was completely responsible for her decision to go overseas, indeed, she was keen to assert that spending time abroad was something that she had always wanted to do. Nonetheless she did admit that watching her friends go abroad did have a role to play, fuelling her own decision, encouraging her to begin applying to universities in the UK:

> **Hazel:** … I always wanted to do it, I think… I had a friend that did five months…in Europe and I think that kind of…fuelled it…I always wanted to go over here, or always go someplace else and study for a while but I think the fact that they did it made me really kick-start me and really made me start applying for schools… *[USA, masters student, Nottingham]*

These cases detail that it is not only the explicit advice and encouragement given to students, but it is primarily the ability for international students to 'see' the experiences of their friends and others abroad that drives them to do the same. As previously identified, the rise of social

USA may choose to spend time studying overseas to immerse themselves in another culture, rather in pursuit of a better education.

networking media have allowed prospective international students to engage with those who have chosen to study overseas in the past more easily, and are able to share footage of their experiences with those who have remained at home (Ellison *et al.* 2007). Ideas of mobility have therefore become more accessible to those who are considering study overseas, and they are often shared through the stronger ties in their networks, as Urry's (2007) mobilities model suggests greater awareness of travel has normalised the condition of long distance mobility. Furthermore, it allows prospective international students to build a picture of what they believe the international student experience is likely to be. Consequently, they leave home with pre-established notions of their overseas experience, developing an imaginative geography of life as an international student through exposure to the mobility of their friends and family.

Establishing Cultures of Mobility

The presence of social networks of mobility therefore leads to the growth of cultures of mobility and an overall normalisation of the travel process. As this paper has shown, the participants were familiar with the concept of travel, either through their own experiences of growing up or through the experience of others within their personal networks. This was evidenced by students who would state that they had family who had studied overseas: cousins, siblings and parents, who had all either gone abroad in the past or were currently living away from home, as well as friends or seniors at university who had left before them. For example, Jack, a student from the USA, noted that within his family, becoming an overseas student was the norm:

> **Jack:** My family has a history of basically going abroad as international students. My brother spent two summers in Japan and my parents also emigrated from the Philippines to the US as postgrads, about the age I am right now… *[USA, masters student, Aberdeen]*

Jack seems aware of the idea that, perhaps if it had not been for this normalisation of travel within his family he would have been less inclined to go overseas himself. However, this was not universal of all students.

These cultures of mobility did not have to be linked specifically to education. Rather, they included family members who had travelled frequently, either as individuals or taking the rest of their family with them, the students included. Lara, a German student, noted that she had lived in several different states within the USA for eight years when she was a child travelling with her parents. When she was unable to find work following an undergraduate degree in Germany, she came to Northern Ireland to volunteer with a charity, before deciding to enrol for a masters course. For Lara there was no specific attraction to living in the UK, while she applied for voluntary posts and for work there she had also applied for similar positions in Romania, and had considered doing a masters in Denmark.

> **Lara:** I did want to go to Ireland, I had travelled around Ireland a bit before and I really liked it. I also [thought] about Scotland or England but I was writing to a lot of different organisations at the time, not just over here, worldwide. I was in contact with some Romanians for a while for work. I had applied for a Masters in Denmark... *[Germany, masters student, Belfast]*

Lara's experiences of travelling had made her feel that that her options were limitless, although she was keen to remain in Europe.

Such cultures of mobility could also foster links to particular places or destinations which were identifiable amongst the participants. There was evidence that some of the students had chosen to study in the UK because members of their social networks had also made their homes in the country, or because people from their hometowns or universities had all chosen to move their in the past. Some, like Martha, a Ghanaian student, had built up large family networks, which were distributed on a global scale:

> **Martha:** …I have a sister here in Luton so like it wasn't such a bad place for me like…And now my brother has also moved to Luton from Germany so…I was quite happy that at least, I'll be in Belfast, but I can at least visit her sometimes…
>
> **Interviewer:** So you've got quite an international family?
>
> **Martha:** Yes…and I have two sisters…in the US…as well. *[Ghana, PhD student, Belfast]*

Martha was the youngest sibling in a large family, all of whom had left Ghana, choosing to establish their lives and bring up families abroad. Martha would therefore have grown up with an understanding of the normality of going overseas (Cairns and Smyth 2011). She too had subsequently left home, but chose to study in Northern Ireland because she would be able to visit her family if she wished without the need for an additional visa. For Martha, as with other students who had embedded cultures of studying overseas within their families, it appears to be a natural part of their lifecourse to go abroad. Those involved and taking part in overseas study, have therefore often had an engagement with travel and living overseas from, at times, a very early age. This had caused the students to develop cosmopolitan attitudes towards long distance mobility. Their experience has shown them that the options available to themselves are varied, making them more open to study abroad. Through such networks overseas a culture of mobility was, and is, deeply embedded, to the point that such forms of mobility were normalised, the idea of international study itself embedded (on the broader concept see Manderscheid 2014).

This normalisation of becoming an international student was not limited to familial cultures of overseas mobility; rather many had friends who had pursued their education abroad as well. As already observed in the case of Priya, it was the experience of seeing friends (and family) who chose to study overseas and being successful in their endeavours that made her realise she would be able to go abroad for a year also. Other students also noted that there were practices of mobility amongst their friends, with Rafiah, from Trinidad and Tobago stating that she had many friends who were studying throughout the UK:

> **Rafiah:** …I had friends…all over the UK…in London, Birmingham…all the way up to…Edinburgh…literally everywhere. *[Trinidad and Tobago, undergraduate student, Nottingham]*

For Rafiah, like Martha it was normal, not only to study abroad, but to do so in the UK in particular. She stated that students from Trinidad and Tobago choose the UK when they are considering where to study, indicating the presence of mobility streams amongst school leavers. Rafiah did state that Canada is now a popular choice for students, however choosing to study in the USA or Canada leads to longer courses and so a greater investment if you choose to do so, both in terms of time and money. Whatever the case though, it was clear that in Trinidad and Tobago for many students the aim is to leave, stating that, "When you get the chance to go you go." She felt that this is primarily due to a lack of choice in her home country with regards to where students can study at a tertiary level. If she had chosen to stay there was only one university in which she could have studied. Leaving opened up more opportunities, once again differentiating her, in terms of the social and cultural capital gained, from students who had remained behind. Offering further suggestions as to how these cultures of student mobility had emerged.

For many students study abroad thus becomes normalised. Indeed, it was an almost universal experience amongst the student's social networks and the decision-maker too had made the same choice to study overseas. However, despite these connections some international students were keen to suggest that they had left of their own accord, the presence of these established networks and cultures of mobility were just happenstance. Nonetheless, it is questionable that if the networks and cultures of mobility were not present, whether the students would feel the same impetus to leave their homeland. While 'push factors' such as a lack of education infrastructure are important (Simpson *et al.* 2010; Gribble 2008) and can force students to seek education elsewhere, these findings do suggest that, even so, migration tends to occur within defined streams and established social structures. To return to Rafiah's example, the lack of infrastructure made her want to leave Trinidad and Tobago, but there were only *certain* destinations which she would consider in terms of where

to study. Those involved will therefore continue to proceed along well defined routes to specific destinations, often choosing to engage in mobility after those in their social networks had previously chosen to move abroad (Choldin 1973; Lee 1966). It is these networks and previous experience of mobility within them that act to sustain the migration process.

Conclusion

As noted at the start of this paper, past studies have stressed that social networks are a factor in *shaping* the geographies of international student mobility (for example, see Collins 2008b; Brooks and Waters 2010; Szelényi 2006). By paying close attention to the relationships students form with those around them, both at hand and at a distance, this paper shows that social networks have a direct and profound influence on whether or not a student chooses to become internationally mobile. In this it is important to understand that in thinking through their possible futures, students often entered into conversations with their wider networks without having decided to study overseas or indeed without a clear view as to their future lives and ambitions. The influence of social networks therefore goes well beyond shaping the pathways of mobility and instead in large part actually determines whether mobility takes place. Social networks therefore are used – sometimes *with* very clear intentions and sometimes *without* any explicit intention – to help assist in the making of decisions, of exposing and exploring possibilities. This is not a neat, linear course. Rather, the multiple contacts and conversations across networks attest to a gradual process which, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, acts to influence the student and ultimately act to critically inform their decision-making and planning. Not only, as Manderscheid (2014) has recently suggested, is individual mobility necessarily relational, the product of social networks, but this relationality is fluid as social networks are made and remade in purposeful ways. Social networks are structuring not just passive structures.

This paper also demonstrates that it is through their wider networks that students learn about the norms of higher education and can make judgements about "the 'right' way of going to university" (Holdsworth 2009:1856). Certainly for these students the 'right' way

involves going overseas. When students are surrounded by those who have chosen to go abroad in the past, their own decision is influenced by this, their choosing to become an international student often based on the reading that this is a normal course of action for people considering tertiary education at home. Priya, for instance, had friends in various overseas locations, as did Rafiah. Going overseas was therefore not tied to a defined migration stream to a particular country or even city, but rather it was simply a normal part of the lifecycle. This offers a contrasting, but complementary, analysis with earlier research. While Collins (2008b), for example, acknowledges the role of networks in overseas mobility, these networks have a clear economic reading, focusing on agencies and entrepreneurial activities, as well as the interpersonal connections of the students. This paper, by contrast, suggests a reading apart from the economic, which shows the strength of these social relationships, using students studying in a range of locations, and of a range of different nationalities. While this is perhaps unsurprising for students from sending countries which have a less well established or emerging higher education infrastructure and therefore large numbers of international students, this research has shown that social networks of friendship and kinship are also a key driver for mobility for those which are also from countries which do not have this problem, such as the USA and Canada. This highlights that these networks are highly significant to the decision making process.

Supporting foundational social network theorists (for instance see Granovetter 1973), this research shows family histories and the experiences of friends, as well as advice from those outside of these realms, are critical factors in choosing overseas study even when it is less common to do so. It is a combination of the stronger ties in a person's social network who have normalised going overseas and the weaker ties which have often provided critical information in terms of where to study. Indeed, *every* individual discussed how these networks influenced them in some way either by direct advice, or through sharing their lived experiences with them, identifying that they are central to the geographies of higher education mobility. Previous work has discussed the role of relationships between students as influencing mobility (see: Collins 2008b; Brooks and Waters 2010; Szelényi 2006),

however this is the first to provide a systematic and in depth analysis of these social networks in their own right. The use of the term 'network' is deliberate. It is not necessary for the students to all have been influenced by family members, or to all have been influenced by the mobility of their wider peer group. The point is that these social networks work in a variety of different ways, leading to the mobility of other individuals in the future.

As a final point, it is important to note that certain individuals, depending on their socio-economic background, will be more likely to consider studying overseas. Those with greater access to financial resources will be more likely to be a part of these cultures of international mobility and will be better able to formulate wider mobile, transnational networks (see Brooks and Waters 2011). This will have wider implications for how universities use these networks in their recruitment policies, as this research demonstrates that they are self-reinforcing and therefore exclusionary. Those not from elite and middle-class backgrounds will have fewer opportunities to take part in these networks, thus there is a tendency for social networks to replicate privilege.

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