

# THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2023

## With travel, comes understanding

Isobel Sanders is one of the top 25 contributors to this year's Global Essay Competition Award. She studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science and attended the 52<sup>nd</sup> St. Gallen Symposium as a Leader of Tomorrow.

'With age, comes wisdom. With travel, comes understanding.' (Sandra Lake)

Legacies are traces from the past. They bring costs or benefits to subsequent generations and shape actions, present and future. Considered in all their complexity, legacies are often mixed: the policymaker's task is to identify the good, preserve it or expand its scope or effect, and replace the bad. In the 21st century, we might easily feel overwhelmed by legacies such as the climate crisis, yet past generations have also handed down beneficial inheritances. I consider **International Student Mobility (ISM)** a prime example.

ISM: Older than it sounds

ISM is a long-standing legacy, its form and significance shaped by time.

In the late Middle Ages, scholars began moving to newly established universities to learn. The emerging merchant class

took advantage of this phenomenon and so, early on, university education became a means of establishing and consolidating elite status. In the eyes of Enlightenment thinkers too, travel and education went hand-in-hand. Voltaire's character, the young Candide, declares that '*Il est certain qu'il faut voyager*' ('Most certainly, one must travel'). At that moment in time, travel was viewed as promoting tolerance; an inoculation against dogmatic or irrational thinking. Then, from the 17th to 19th centuries, wealthy young northern European men embarked on the 'Grand Tour', a journey around Europe. However, it was only in the 20th century, with the advent of mass travel and broader educational access, that student mobility extended beyond an elite activity. In the aftermath of the two world wars, ISM expanded as countries felt a strong need to promote cultural tolerance and understanding through direct contact. From the 1950s, political considerations predominated as ISM became a form of soft power and means

to demonstrate ideological superiority. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the paradigm shifted again to focus on:

- the benefits of intellectual exchange for **economic competitiveness** in the knowledge economy;
- **accessible opportunities** through new scholarships and harmonised rules on student loans;
- in Europe, the goal of bolstering **social citizenship** and **democracy**.

For over a millennium, ISM has evolved to suit shifting tastes and needs. However the greatest changes have occurred over the last 50 years. Nevertheless, this most recent version of ISM is in danger.

#### Social right, societal gain

ISM benefits both individual and society, both home and host countries. It brings strong **economic and social value** in today's world – the Nordic countries publicly recognise this (Elken, et al., 2022).

In an increasingly globalised knowledge economy, transnational learning and knowledge-sharing facilitates innovation and supports economic growth and employment. The Danish government acknowledges this, portraying ISM as contributing to economic growth while offering scholarships and communicating the benefits of ISM to students and society as a whole. With ISM, knowledge can more easily 'spill over' into other countries, circulating among new research groups and parallel sectors, driving more efficient scientific and technological progress. Rapid progress

decreases the shelf-life of skills, but ISM is also part of the solution. Why is this? Best practice relates not just to academic research, but also to teaching. Global competition between universities incentivises world-class institutions to improve teaching. In Finland, recent attention has fallen on improving the quality of Finnish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to promote innovation and compete globally.

Incoming student mobility also contributes to academic and cultural exchange, globalising home students and residents. Cultural exchange develops solidarity, tolerance and understanding. In this vein, Norway introduced scholarships for students from poor countries in the early 1960s, a rare example of student mobility as part of development aid. A greater sense of international citizenship accompanies global mobility, raising young people's awareness of problems faced by citizens of other countries. Additionally, young adults gain key skills such as language competency, independence and autonomy. International experiences are also crucial for educational freedom: students can choose where they study. To this effect, the Norwegian government expects its universities to provide ISM opportunities to all students.

#### Falling short and failing students: an endogenous threat

ISM, as conceived in the 1980s, highlighted the importance of accessible opportunities. In the EU the Bologna Process aimed to address ISM's social selectivity. However, in an increasingly globalised, competitive world, ISM accessibility is threatened. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to study abroad (Schnepf and Colagrossi, 2020). Indeed, ISM has

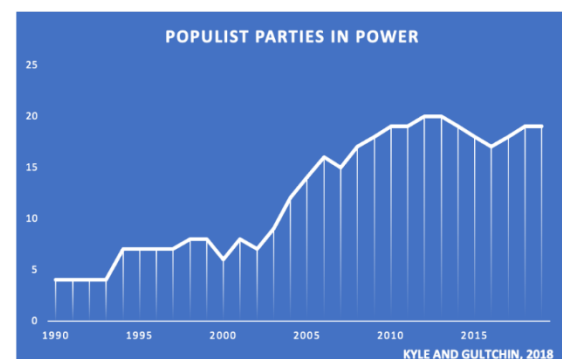
become more socially select over the years (Netz and Finger, 2016). EU policymakers recognise this. Narvracsics (European Commissioner, 2014-2019) tweeted: 'We have problems in reaching certain social groups, especially those students from vulnerable economic strata who cannot pay for their participation because there is not enough money at home'. Despite aims to widen access, scholarships often go to wealthier students, who are informed about programmes. Moreover, a background of academic achievement makes their application hyper-competitive. Where students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do study abroad, their experience is worse and may even be less safe (Sheller, 2018). These students are less able to participate in local student social life, a key part of cultural exchange.

Why does it matter? Educational level and place of study constitute education privilege (Khullar, 2022); educational advantage is linked to employment advantage. There is a danger that, with an internationalised and commercialised higher education system, without equal access to spatial mobility, we create a social elite of international mobile students who then become a professional elite, to the detriment of labour social mobility (Hartmann, 2017). Access to financial resources to study at global HEIs is thus essential to achieve equality of opportunity for students from all backgrounds. While social mobility is sometimes reduced to a purely ethical notion, there is also a strong economic rationale behind a meritocratic society. For individuals, participation in ISM correlates with higher wages and steeper wage growth (Rodrigues, 2013; Cammelli et al., 2008). Moreover, there is a process of cultural matching in recruitment; ISM is a cultural marker that indicates to

recruiters that you are the 'right type' (Rivera, 2012). International organisations and businesses sometimes use points-based recruitment systems which (directly or indirectly) privilege students who have studied abroad. More broadly, investment in human capital creates long-term economic growth; investing in ISM for a broader group of students will pay off in the future. Expanding access to ISM is essential to make the most of the opportunities of an increasingly globalised economy.

### *The walls are closing in (on the young): an exogenous threat*

ISM is also under external threat. Without policies to mitigate its effects, globalisation increases income inequality, driving societal divisions between those who benefit from economic openness and those who feel left behind. Inequality has contributed to the rise in support for Eurosceptic parties as well as populist and radical right-wing political groups (Bachtler et al., 2017), posing a serious threat to ISM. Indeed, parties on both the left and the right favour closed borders, indirectly harming student mobility. Against a backdrop of populism and immigration debates, ISM has suffered as unfortunate collateral damage of politicians' attempts to demonstrate their control over immigration levels.



For those contemplating studying abroad, barriers include expense and perceived hostility. Costly student visas are, for instance, a financial disincentive. Unfortunately, since they act like a 'flat tax' on a behaviour unwelcome to the host country, they harm equality of access. For some, an expensive visa may be the straw that broke the camel's back. Costs also take the form of withdrawn benefits. During the Brexit referendum, the Leave side promised to maintain Erasmus but during post-vote negotiations Erasmus was taken off the table. Withdrawing from Erasmus signalled the UK's new direction to voters with unfortunate consequences for young students hoping to benefit from Erasmus' various offerings.

Hostile political discourse may also discourage international students from coming to a country to study (Lomer, 2018). Students may feel unwelcome and prefer to study at home, having internalised unfriendly media portrayals of immigrants. However, since ISM promotes mutual tolerance and cultural understanding this establishes a negative feedback loop. More concrete barriers include quotas; recently the UK government announced that it was contemplating capping the number of international student visas to decrease net migration. ISM is in deep waters.

#### *Sailing towards smoother seas: recommendations*

Given the economic, political, social and cultural benefits of ISM, it is imperative that we preserve it for successive generations. However, the world has changed and preservation may be insufficient. Rather, we need to preserve the principle of accessible ISM, protect ISM from populist threats and promote the long-term socioeconomic advantages of ISM at individual and

national level. A **preserve, protect, promote** strategy encompasses both top-down and bottom-up measures. There are two main pathways, **financial** and **social**, however these need to be supported by **informational** measures.

Financial fears top the list of barriers to mobility (Souto-Oter et al., 2013). There are many contributing factors, each requiring a specific approach:

1: ISM is predominantly associated with certain universities and degree fields

- Earmarking funds for upcoming mobility on the basis of mobility of previous student cohorts will not significantly widen access to new degree fields and may perpetuate inequality
- **Funds should be allocated relative to the total number of students, with the possibility of extra funds if a HEI has a high proportion of underprivileged students**

2: Current grants do not fully allow for different costs of living in countries across the world and national student loans and grants vary in generosity

- This is detrimental to both intra-national and inter-national social mobility
- **Funds must be country-adjusted to better reflect cost of living in home and host countries**

3: Current grants and scholarships are often awarded to those who do not need financial help

- Awarding only those students with the top grades scholarships or grants can be detrimental to

- social mobility and equality of opportunity
- Wealthy students with grants spend more than less wealthy students deem necessary while studying abroad (Messer and Wolter, 2005)
- **Funds should be designed to promote accessibility and push those that can afford ISM to use their own funds through less stringent academic requirements, more means-tested grants and fewer, more generous grants**

These first three action points must be accompanied by better publicity of financial support in order to alter perceptions of accessibility.

4: Individuals may weigh short-term opportunities more heavily than long-term financial gain

- Students may worry about prolonging their studies with ISM when they could be in the workforce
- Students may not want to leave a part-time job in the home country for fear of the position being filled when they return
- **There is a need for information campaigns so that students have a better sense of the long-term financial benefits of ISM and make informed decisions**

Financial incentives alone are insufficient (Munk, 2009). Policies to promote broader cultural change are needed:

1: Those without international social networks are less likely to study abroad

- Students without international experience may find the idea of ISM intimidating
- There are plenty of first-generation student networks to de-mystify the university experience by providing online advice via articles, blogs and podcasts
- **Similar networks for student mobility should be established with organisational help from HEIs and NGOs**

2: Lack of language competence can be a barrier to ISM

- Pre-university experience with languages impacts ISM; those without language competence may be put off ISM or may even be ineligible (Lörz et al., 2016)
- **States should boost language learning earlier in life so that language is not a barrier**

3: Those who experience mobility at an earlier age are more likely to participate in ISM

- Being mobile young makes mobility less financially and psychologically costly later in life (DaVanzo, 1981)
- School exchanges and mobility programmes, such as Nordplus Junior, would habituate students to other cultures and reduce fear of the unknown
- **Supranational institutions should earmark funds for early age (primary and secondary school) mobility**

4: Individuals may weigh short-term social costs more heavily than long-term social gains

- Being away from a partner or friends is an important barrier to ISM
- Families and friends may not be supportive of social mobility through ISM (Lareau, 2015)
- **More focus should be placed on the social opportunities (new friends, places and experiences) that ISM brings to counterbalance perceived losses**

Financial, social and informational policy should work together to promote accessible ISM. Not only would this counteract the internal threat of inequality but it would also reframe the discourse on student migration. With more people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds participating, ISM would shift from an elitist practice to an integral part of many students' educational experience. Having undertaken ISM, the next generation of voters may be less likely to develop populist views as they age. Indeed, populism may end up being threatened by ISM...

## References

### Articles

- DaVanzo, Julie, 'Repeat migration, information costs, and location-specific capital', *Population and Environment*, 4(1), 1981, pp.45–73
- Elken, Mari, et al., 'Policy framing of international student mobility in the Nordic countries', *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 2022, pp.1–27
- Findlay, Allan M et al., 'World class? An investigation of globalisation, difference and international student mobility', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37(1), 2012, pp.118–131
- Hartmann, Michael, 'Class-specific habitus and the social reproduction of the business elite in Germany and France', *The Sociological Review*, 48(2), 2000, pp.262–282
- Hirschman, Albert, 'Exit, Voice, and the State', *World politics*, 31(1), 1978, pp.90–107
- Kymlicka, Will, 'Solidarity in diverse societies: Beyond neoliberal multiculturalism and welfare chauvinism', *Comparative Migration Studies*, 3(1), 2015, pp.41–62
- Lareau, Annette, 'Cultural knowledge and social inequality', *American sociological review*, 80(1), 2015, pp.1–27
- Lomer, Sylvie, 'UK policy discourses and international student mobility: The deterrence and subjectification of international students', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 16(3), 2018, pp.308–324
- Lörz, Markus et al., 'Why do students from underprivileged families less often intend to study abroad?', *Higher education*, 72(2), 2016, pp.153–174
- Magni, Gabriele, 'Economic Inequality, Immigrants and Selective Solidarity: From Perceived Lack of Opportunity to In-Group Favoritism', *British Journal of Political Science*, 51(4), 2021, pp.1357–1380
- Munk, Martin D, 'Transnational Investments in Informational Capital: A Comparative Study of Denmark, France and Sweden', *Acta sociologica*, 52(1), 2009, pp.5–23
- Netz, Nicolai, & Claudia Finger, 'New Horizontal Inequalities in German Higher Education? Social Selectivity of Studying Abroad Between 1991 and 2012', *Sociology of Education*, 89(2), 2016, pp.79–98
- Rivera, Lauren, 'Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms', *American Sociological Review*, 77(6), 2012, pp.999–1022

Schneepf, Sylke, & Colagrossi, Marco, 'Is unequal uptake of Erasmus mobility really only due to students' choices? The role of selection into universities and fields of Study', *Journal of European Social Policy*, 30(4), 2020, pp.436–451

Sheller, Mimi, 'Theorising mobility justice', *Tempo Social : Revista de Sociologia da USP*, 30(2), 2018, pp.17–34

Shields, Robin, 'Globalization and International Student Mobility: A Network Analysis', *Comparative Education Review*, 57(4), 2013, pp.609–636

Souto-Otero, Manuel et al., 'Barriers to International Student Mobility: Evidence From the Erasmus Program', *Educational Researcher*, 42(2), 2013, pp.70–77

### Research Papers

Ashley, Louise, et al., (2015), 'A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions', Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, UK

Bachtler, John & Polverari, Laura, (2017), 'Research for REGI Committee - Building Blocks for a Future Cohesion Policy - First Reflections', European Parliament Directorate General for Internal Policies, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies

Jordan, Kyle & Gultchin, Limor, (2018), 'Populists in Power Around the World', Tony Blair Institute for Global Change

Messer, Dolores & Wolter, Stefan, (2005), 'Are Student Exchange Programs Worth It?', The Institute for the Study of Labour (IZA), Bonn

Rodrigues, Margarida, (2012), 'Does student mobility during higher education pay?', European Commission Joint Research Centre

### Books

Cammelli, Andrea, et al., 'Study experience abroad: Italian graduate characteristics and employment outcomes' in Byram, Mike & Dervin, Fred (eds.) *Students, Staff and Academic Mobility in Higher Education*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp.217-236

Douglass, John Aubrey, *Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Populists, Autocrats, and the Future of Higher Education*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021)

Weimar, Leasa & Barleta, Aleandra, 'The Rise of Nationalism: The Influence of Populist Discourses on International Student Mobility and Migration in the UK and US' in Weimer & Nokkala (eds.) *Universities as Political Institutions Universities as Political Institutions: Higher Education Institutions in the Middle of Academic, Economic and Social Pressures*, (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp.33-57



### Webpages

Khullar, Ipsitaa, (2022), 'Combatting the privilege of attending elite institution, LSE Business Review Blog 2022, [Elite institution privilege | LSE Business Review](#) 30th January 2023

Ojeda, Dario et al., (2022), 'Multi-speed Erasmus: economic inequalities and higher education opportunities', European Data Journalism Network, [Multi-speed Erasmus: economic inequalities and higher education opportunities / Data news / News / Home - edjnet \(europeandatajournalism.eu\)](#) 30th January 2023

Staton, Bethan & Pickard, Jim, (2022), 'UK university leaders defend benefits of overseas students', The Financial Times, <https://www.ft.com/content/29c19c5c-db18-4929-a440-a247e7003faf> last accessed 30th January 2023