

Further Understanding on International Student Mobilities in Asia is Needed

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Traditionally, Asia was regarded as one of the most prominent sources of international students (ISs) for developed countries in the Western world, including North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Nevertheless, the first decade of the 21st century observed a shifting pattern of international student mobilities (ISM) in Asia (Chan, 2012). From being sole exporters or deficit exporters (i.e., number of inflow students are smaller than number of outflow students) of international students as observed in 2010 backward, Asian countries, notably China, Japan, Korea, and Singapore have been increasingly identified as the new hubs of international students, especially those coming from the neighboring countries within the region. In the second decade of the 21st century, the shifting pattern of ISM in Asia as observed between 2000 and 2010 appeared to intensify. On the one hand, new competitors entering the race of international student attraction include Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia (Vuong et al., 2021). On the other hand, increasing non-Asian students (ISs from other contingents) select Asia as destinations for education purpose (see Belyavina, 2013; Tran & Vu, 2018). By 2019, there was 746,983 international students in Asia, which accounted for 12.3% of total ISM across the globe (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). The figures are significantly higher than the respective data in 2010 (442,938 students, 11.7%) and 2000 (176,912 students, 8.4%)

Despite becoming a growing hub of international students, Asia appears to receive insufficient attention from researchers in the field of international education and student mobilities. The trajectory of newly published research on ISM in Asia does not appear to keep pace with the growing inflow of international students in Asia. In a review of studies on ISM in Asia between 1984 and 2019 (Pham et al., 2021), my colleagues and I computed the two set of ratios for comparison, these are: (i) the number of studies on ISM in Asia/the number of studies on ISM in general; and (ii) the number of ISs in Asia/the number of ISs in

the world. Our analysis reveals that the former ratio ranges approximately between 2 to 4% in the period of 2000 and 2017; meanwhile the respective range for the latter is approximately between 12 to 14%. These figures show that there is stillroom for further investigation of ISM in Asia.

International students have brought a range of socio-cultural, intellectual, and economic benefits for Asian countries such as “human capital investment, knowledge transfer, and national capacity building” (see Chan, 2012, p.221). Therefore, I would like to call for attention from colleagues in international education community to prioritize ISM in Asia in their research agenda, including comparative research across countries and regions. I recommend some implications for stakeholders and potential avenues for future studies on ISM in Asia:

First, closer linkage between government authorities and international education scholars is crucial. Over previous decades, although several national strategies on higher education internationalization among Asian countries have been released with targets on international students being placed at the center, few government-funded projects have been allocated to international education scholars to develop nuanced understandings of ISM in Asia, including their motivations, well-being, educational experiences and outcomes, engagement, lifestyles, expectations, plans and impacts. Most extant literature on ISM in Asia are bottom-up and in many cases, these studies reflect the personal interests of the authors but not the views of policymakers, students, and other key stakeholders. Thus, it is crucial to have more strengthened liaison between government and researchers for enhancing our understandings of ISM in Asia and for supporting the internationalization of higher education in Asian countries.

Second, current and future scholars on ISM in Asia should consider overlooked or under-researched areas, including : (i) horizontal perspective (i.e., geography), the extant studies mainly focus on Malaysia, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, or South Korea as studied samples. Thus, the under-represented destination countries of international students to be considered in future studies may include Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, or Vietnam. (ii) vertical dimension (i.e., level of education), since the current literature on ISM in Asia mainly focus on undergraduate levels, future research may pay more attention ton under-researched education sectors such as postgraduate studies, school and vocational education and training sectors. (iii) Another potential avenue is the research of ISM in Asia and COVID-19. Over the past two years, there have been several initiatives on ISM stemming under the conditions and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, some universities have implemented virtual mobility programs in which physical presence of international students in an Asian university is not necessary. Instead, an exchange student is able to participate in host university virtually (e.g., see ITS Global Engagement, 2021).

Third, ISM studies, indeed, are interdisciplinary by nature. It is critical to research ISM from different perspectives: education, psychology, culture, language, behavior, or management to name a few. This possibility is highly illuminated in our bibliometrics work on ISM in Asia between 1984 and 2019 (Pham et al., 2021). In this study, we identified the key citation sources from

previous studies on ISM in Asia, which come from different disciplines. For instance, among “culture” category, International Journal of Intercultural Relations is identified as one of the main major citation sources. Other high-profile sources include Foreign Language Annals (Language), Higher Education (Education) or Tourism Management (Tourism). Subsequently, previous documents on ISM in Asia were also published in various journals focusing on different disciplines such as International Journal of Educational Development (category “education”), Business Process Management Journal (category “management”) or Journal of Behavioral Addictions (category “behavior”).

In conclusion, it is apparent that ISM in Asia has become an essential component of the current ISM across the globe. Nevertheless, extant research on ISM in Asia seems to play only a peripheral role in the overall literature on ISM. It is therefore a critical time for scholars in the international education community to pay more attention to this under-researched topic.

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