Emerging Scholars Research Summary

'Edugration' as a wicked problem: Higher education and three-step immigration

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ABSTRACT

Two-step immigration is now a well-established policy strategy in countries such as Australia, Canada, and the U.S. to retain so-called 'highly skilled,' or higher-wage, immigrants. However, as this paper argues, the specific recruitment and retention of post-secondary international students in some contexts has become a distinct three-*step form of immigration, shifting the role of higher education in society. The term* edugration – *an amalgamation of 'education' and 'immigration' – is proposed to describe this system. This paper also contends that* edugration *presents an ethically wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973), requiring not only increased attention from higher education, international education, and (im)migration scholars, but also a shift in our analytic approach.*

Keywords: education-migration nexus, edugration, international student mobility, international students, internationalization, wicked problem

INTRODUCTION

The recruitment and retention of post-secondary international students as immigrants has become a distinct and consequential three-step form of immigration. Yet because the process spans two relatively disparate fields – education and immigration – it is rarely analyzed in a holistic way (Brunner, 2017), foreclosing opportunities to fully articulate its complexities. Here, I propose the term *edugration* – amalgamating *education* and *immigration* – to describe this unique three-step process and to encourage more multi/interdisciplinary systemic engagements. I argue that, when viewed through this comprehensive lens, *edugration* presents an ethically wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973), requiring not only increased attention from higher/international education and (im)migration scholars, but also a shift in our analytic approach.

EDUGRATION AS A DISTINCT FORM OF IMMIGRATION

International student mobility's intersection with permanent immigration arose largely in the past 25 years. In an intensifying global race for so-called "highly skilled,' or higher-wage, economic migrants at the turn of the century, many minority-world countries (a term roughly analogous to Global North; see Alam, 2008) economically and demographically dependent on immigrants — came to function as recruiters rather than gatekeepers, facilitating "talent for citizenship" exchanges (Shachar, 2006, p. 148). The U.S., Canada, Australia, and France attracted particularly high net inflows of highly-educated migrants during this time (OECD, 2008), and many remained long-term. As countries competed for the most desirable immigrants – which, from the perspective of neoliberal governments, meant those best positioned to integrate economically – a trend emerged: *two-step* immigration, or the permanent retention of temporary residents (e.g. foreign workers) already integrated into local labour markets (Akbari & MacDonald, 2014; Boucher & Cerna, 2014; Gregory, 2014; Hawthorne, 2010;). Two-step immigration is now a well-established concept in immigration policy and highly influential in countries such as the U.S., Australia, and Canada (Clarke et al., 2019; Crossman et al., 2020; Dauvergne, 2016).

During roughly the same time, a global race for international students also developed. As the number of international students climbed (IOM GMDAC, 2021), so did their tuition payments and other expenditures, which became increasingly vital to higher education systems and local economies. While international students had previously been viewed as short-term visitors, some

countries (e.g. Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the U.K., the U.S., and Germany) began promoting post-graduation work permits as recruitment tools. In a two-step immigration policy environment, these recently-graduated temporary workers emerged as "ideal" migrants to retain due to their relatively young age, high human/economic capital, and language proficiency (GAC, 2019; Scott et al., 2015). In other words, they required comparatively limited integration support from governments (Hawthorne, 2012; Trilokekar & El Masri, 2019), thanks in part to the pre-sorting inherent to higher education's selective admission processes and the extended period of time international students spent embedded within education institutions. Soon, permanent residency itself – or rather the possibility of permanent residency, a nuance not always made clear during recruitment – was used to promote national higher education systems.

In two-step immigration literature, many conflate the study and post-graduation work permit periods, referring to immigrants who "come first as a temporary immigrant, to *work or study*, and then seek to move to permanent status" (Gregory, 2014, p. 1, emphasis added). Some international students do transition directly to permanent residency after graduation (Brunner, 2017). However, much more common is a three-step filtering system involving periods of both study and work: international students who (1) gain admission to, and graduate from, a qualifying higher education institution can (2) compete in the labour market for a limited time on a post-graduation work permit, during which those who gain sufficient qualifying work experience can (3) remain permanently as immigrants and, eventually, citizens. This particular three-step process – in which the first step as a student is explicitly identified to make its significance clear – is what I refer to as *edugration*.

Viewing *edugration* as a system is important. For example, it shows how (1) the line between student and immigrant recruitment has blurred, (2) the co-dependency between higher education and other immigrant actors (such as the state) is entrenched, and (3) international student mobility has become a specific form of social mobility (Kim & Kwak, 2019; Maldonado-Maldonado, 2014). It also raises questions about higher education's role in society, particularly in the selection (Brunner, 2017) and integration (Walton-Roberts, 2011) of immigrants.

As Giebel (2020) wrote, "by admitting international students... universities are assuming a role in international relations [which] must come with responsibility and integrity" (p. 74), echoing calls for more ethical international

student mobility practices (Coate & Rathnayake, 2012). Yet without a comprehensive understanding of how *edugration* functions, universities and individuals alike are limited by a partial understanding of their own role in a larger system. Those working, and studying in higher education tend to focus on the first step (the study period) in the three-step process. They are often unaware of the cascading *edugration* effects that follow seemingly minor policy changes in immigration or higher education policy arenas, the former of which tends to shift rapidly (Dauvergne, 2016). On the other hand, (im)migration policy scholars tend to focus primarily on immigrants' transition from temporary foreign worker to permanent resident (the second and third steps of *edugtaion*). This leads to an overemphasis on the role of employers, ignoring the power higher education institutions, recruiters, and other internationalization agents hold in determining the characteristics of, and integrating, temporary foreign workers. It is to these conversations I suggest higher/international education scholars might more robustly contribute.

EDUGRATION AS A TOPIC IN HIGHER AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION STUDIES

Although growing (Bozheva et al., 2021; Chen & Skuterud, 2020), research examining *edugration* remains limited, particularly within education (Brunner, 2017). The *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education* [JCIHE], for example, contains several explorations of higher education and international student integration (Ballo et al., 2019; Nilsson, 2019; Sin & Tavares, 2019; Yao, 2015). However, few explore how this process is concurrently tied up in migration systems (Cong & Glass, 2019; Etshim, 2019). Only one JCIHE article directly addresses internationalization and immigration policy connections (Al-Haque, 2017). As international students become increasingly positioned as temporary workers (during their studies, after graduation, or both) and potential immigrants, more work is needed to bridge higher/international education studies and (im)migration studies.

More nuanced ethical discussions about the issue are also needed (Stein, 2019b). In JCIHE, authors largely treat integration as a worthwhile goal (with the possible exception of Yao, (2015), who focuses instead on students' social belonging). This is understandable, given that international students face real and limiting "social and academic exclusion triggered by linguistic and cultural difference," (Sin & Tavares, 2019, p. 64; Van Mol, 2019). However, the

technique, measurement, and promotion of integration can itself be a colonial practice. As Schinkel (2018) writes:

>the agenda of those who insist on 'immigrant integration', and who thereby a priori assume that migrants have not really arrived, are not yet 'members of society' is in its effects only slightly removed from the explicit racism of the current white backlash on the (alt-)right (p. 15).

Many of us research how to 'better' integrate international students (or immigrants) out of a desire to mitigate exclusion. However, in this attempt, we may unknowingly or unintentionally perpetuate a larger harm (Andreotti, 2012).

Geibel (2020) wrote that higher education is driven by two types of motivations: strategic which focuses on "advantages to a person, community or state in relation to others… rooted within the neoliberal view of globalization and development" (p. 68), and humanistic, which seek "to reduce prejudice and ignorance thereby leading to the development of global citizens who are able to actively contribute to a better world" (p. 69). Many surface-level higher education injustices occur when the former masquerades as the latter – an unfortunately common occurrence in international education. However, a less visible violence occurs one layer deeper: when a supposedly humanistic motivation masks something else.

As a field, we need to supplement the immediate question of *how* with *why*. We should interrogate how the rules of these games are set, whose interests they are rigged to serve, and how we, as scholars and practitioners, are complicit in playing. This work is often uncomfortable because it requires critiquing an ecosystem we are invested in and is unsatisfying because it offers no easy solutions. However, it is necessary if we wish to avoid reproducing current harms (Stein, 2019a). It can also be a productive and even generous practice if we use our collective imperfections and impurities as starting points rather than ends (Shotwell, 2016; Todd, 2009). In what follows, I introduce a way to consider *edugration* through this lens.

EDUGRATION AS A WICKED PROBLEM

The ethical issues involved in *edugration* are complex (Brunner, 2022). The system is often painted as a triple win: students gain a valuable education and desirable citizenship on the global market; higher education institutions gain revenue, labor, and diversity; and immigrant-dependent countries gain human/economic capital, population growth, and soft power. However, this

framing ignores *edugration's* larger replications of privilege and power, concealing externalized losses such as brain drain and problematic enablement such as the dominance of a hierarchical global imaginary rooted in Western supremacy which dictates the desirability of its education (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). It also overlooks those international students who are filtered out in the process, unable to achieve the promise of permanent residency (Al-Haque, 2017); the varying degrees of "cultural suicide" international students may undergo as they are (often implicitly) asked to integrate (Tierney, 1999, p. 82; Yao, 2015); and the affective impacts of embodying an 'international student' role, where one's desirability is layered with perceptions of threat and racism (Obradović-Ratković, 2020;Schiffecker, 2020). In a broader sense, it ignores the ways in which colonialism (settler or otherwise) played constitutive roles in the development of minority-world societies (Ellermann & O'Heran, 2021), and how both higher education and (im)migration continue to play active roles in colonialism today.

      Edugration also elongates the time spent in 'temporariness' as a migrant. For some, the retention of already-integrated temporary residents as immigrants offers a promising antidote to brain waste or over education – painful experiences well-known to immigrants selected from abroad who struggle to leverage their human capital (e.g. education) gained elsewhere (Crossman et al., 2020; Lo et al., 2019). For others, it problematically cements a precarious period of provisional admittance and conditional inclusion in not only temporary, but now also permanent, migration (Rajkumar at al., 2012). Two-step immigration has been called "probationary immigration" (Ellermann & Gorokhovskaia, 2019, p. 45) and "trial migration" in that it "allow[s] states to 'pre-test' potential permanent migrants…reflect[ing] the demise of 'settlement' of migrants as a public value" (Dauvergne, 2016, p. 176) as well as the privatization of integration. *Edugration* extends that probationary trial period – typically by years – in which entitlements such as working, voting, and social services are restricted, settlement costs are borne by individuals, and permanent residency is never guaranteed.

      In short, *edugration* is a wicked problem. Rittel and Webber (1973) identified a distinction between problems: some were 'tame' (definable and easily broken into manageable, solvable parts) while others were 'wicked' (elusive and resistant to simple solutions) (pp.160-161). Table 1 lists six

characteristics of wicked problems (as described by van Berkel & Manickam, 2020) illustrated by *edugration*.

Table 1: *Edugration's* wicked problem characteristics

Wicked problem characteristic	Example(s) within *edugration*
Can be defined in multiple ways	Framed as: internationalization of higher education; immigration selection systems; access to education; international social mobility; ongoing settler-colonialism; over-reliance on international student markets; etc.
Cannot be distilled into smaller problems	E.g. economies and higher education systems are deeply invested; while intertwined, they seek different outcomes and are regulated by different jurisdictions
Involves multiple parties and interests	Actors include: students (international and domestic); HE systems; immigration regimes; Indigenous peoples and nations; non-humans (e.g. impacted by climate crisis); etc.
Invokes different proposed solutions	Proposed solutions include: increasing (or restricting) the number of international students; retaining more (or less) international students as immigrants; prioritizing certain international students as immigrants (e.g. those who will better 'integrate,' or those who have been historically disadvantaged and are more 'deserving'); charging international students more (or less) tuition; expanding (or disinvesting from) international student mobility; etc.
Triggers new problems with each solution	E.g. post-graduation work permit holders in Canada have been shown to be underemployed (Choi et al., 2021) and may compete with lower-wage workers (CIC, 2015)
Unpredictable	E.g. ripple effects of COVID-19's international student (physical) mobility interruptions (Brunner, 2022)

Wicked problems are "messes" – sets of interrelated problems forming a "system of problems" (Ackoff, 1974, p. 21). These messes are inseparable from other challenges, and the resulting interconnections between these systems, or "systems of systems," is what make them so resistant to analysis and resolution (Horn & Weber, 2007, p. 6).

Positioning *edugration* as a wicked problem does several things. It encourages linkages beyond the field of higher/international education to broaden its discussion. It shifts the conversation away from individual moves of innocence (or blame) to show how we are all implicated, to varying degrees, in 'social messes.' It also encourages moves past business as usual towards radically different approaches to higher education.

What it does not do is show a way out of the mess. Instead, it "resist[s] the temptation for certainty, totality, and instrumentalization in Western reasoning by keeping our claims contingent, contextual, tentative, and incomplete" (Ahenakew, 2016, p. 333). That next step is for all of us to find.

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