

## **A Second Chance at ‘Success’:**

### **UK students and global circuits of higher education**

**Rachel Brooks and Johanna Waters**

**Published in *Sociology* in 2009**

#### **Introduction**

Student mobility for higher education is not a recent phenomenon. Indeed, as Rivza and Teichler (2007) note, one in ten of the students at medieval universities came from other countries. Nevertheless, during the nineteenth century and the majority of the twentieth century, as a result of the dominance of the nation state, travelling outside of one’s country of origin to pursue a higher education was relatively rare, extending to only two to three per cent of the entire student population (Teichler, 2004). Recent years have, however, seen a reversal of this trend, as increasing numbers of tertiary students have chosen to study abroad. The OECD (2007) notes that, in 2005, over 2.7 million such students were enrolled outside of their country of citizenship, representing a five per cent increase on the previous year. Patterns do, however, differ significantly by country, with considerably greater migration from east to west and from poorer countries to their richer counterparts.

As far as the UK is concerned, while the proportion of ‘outgoing’ students is lower than in its main European neighbours (Sussex Centre for Migration Research, 2004), it is notably higher than in other Anglophone countries such as the US and Australia. Furthermore, while the

number of UK students who move overseas for the *whole* of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree is small, there is some evidence to suggest that it may be increasing. Statistics from the US, for example, show that the number of UK students enrolled in US universities increased by 2 per cent between 2005-06 and 2006-07 (to 8438) (Institute of International Education, 2007). Similarly, the Fulbright Commission has reported a considerable increase in the number of schools and colleges at which it has been asked to talk (Shepherd, 2006), while a number of British newspapers have highlighted cases of students who have chosen to study in low- or no-fee countries (such as Sweden and the Netherlands) as a direct result of the increasing cost of study at home (Clark, 2006).

Moreover, even if the number of outgoing UK students remains small, it nevertheless constitutes an important group – both in terms of providing potential members of the future ‘global elite’, comfortable at working across national boundaries and cosmopolitan in lifestyle and outlook (Mazlish and Morss, 2005) and helping to establish a new kind of migrant profile. Indeed, Murphy-Lejeune (2002) argues that one of the most significant such profiles ‘is that of the highly skilled worker, seeking professional added value or moving for study reasons and whose migration may only be temporary...The mobile European student paves the way for this new type of migrant’ (p.2).

A focus on internationally mobile UK students also articulates with wider debates about the nature of higher education (HE) in contemporary Britain. It has been argued cogently that, as a result of the expansion of the HE system in the UK, there is no longer such a clear relationship between progression to university *per se* and the achievement of labour market advantage (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Author A, 2009). Others have taken this further, suggesting that the more general relationship between academic credentials and social

mobility is considerably less clear now than it was several decades ago (Wolf, 2002). Under these new conditions, it is argued that middle class students and their families have to find new ways to reproduce their social advantage through, for example, the colonisation of the highest status universities and colleges (Reay et al., 2005) and the development of 'personal capital' (through relevant paid work and extra-curricular activities) alongside the acquisition of academic qualifications (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Within this increasingly competitive environment, we ask whether overseas education can be considered another means whereby privileged groups seek to maintain their social advantage. Indeed, Findlay et al. (2006) speculate that international education 'could be claimed to be a key mechanism by which the intellectually most vital elements of a country's elite form heterolocal social networks' (p.291).

Studies that have focussed on other areas of the world have certainly pointed to the important role of overseas education in securing a privileged labour market position and opening up access to elite social networks. In her study of the ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong, Ong (1999) argues that, for many, strategies of capital accumulation begin with the acquisition of a Western education, while Rizvi (2000) has emphasised the high status attached to overseas qualifications by employers in Malaysia. Similarly, Author B (2007) contends that amongst Hong Kong professionals 'the overseas educated constitute an exclusive club, formed through sharing experiences of education and migration, that bestows various tangible benefits on its members' (p.95). The remainder of this article explores whether similar calculations underpin British students' decisions to study abroad.

## Research methods

Between September 2007 and February 2008, 85 in-depth interviews were conducted with young adults who were either considering studying overseas for the whole of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree, or who had returned from such a period abroad. The numbers recruited in each of these categories are given in the top row of Table 1. We hoped, not only to achieve a reasonable balance in the number of interviewees in each category, but also to recruit a reasonably diverse sample in terms of gender, ethnicity and social class.

Respondents *considering* overseas education were recruited through a wide variety of means including: mailings and phonecalls to schools and careers offices; a visit to a higher education fair organised by the Fulbright Commission; email and intranet advertisements at the universities of Surrey, Liverpool and Leeds; and Facebook groups. Young adults who had *completed* an overseas degree were recruited through: contact with 65 alumni associations of overseas universities and the Canadian Rhodes Scholars Foundation; the directory of past scholars, published by the Commonwealth Scholars Commission; mailings and phonecalls to the human resources department of companies listed within the FTSE 100; advertisements circulated to staff at a number of universities; and ‘snowballing’ via our own personal contacts.

The characteristics of our achieved sample are obviously influenced by our means of recruitment. This is particularly so at the institutional level, in that the schools and universities that were most helpful to us, in terms of contacting students and/or sending our emails on our behalf, are better represented in the overall sample. Nevertheless, our sample is reasonably diverse in other respects: overall, we interviewed 48 men and 37 women, and 22 respondents were from minority ethnic backgrounds. The social class of our sample is much

more homogenous: the majority of our undergraduate sample (those who were seriously considering studying abroad for a bachelor's degree or who had already completed a first degree overseas) came from privileged backgrounds and had attained a high level of academic qualification, often in private schools. Indeed, 19 of the 31 respondents in our undergraduate sample had attended a private school. We would argue, however, that this should not be automatically viewed as an artefact of our sampling method (particularly as we contacted a large number of state schools), but as a reasonably accurate indication of the social profile of many students who do pursue an overseas education. Indeed, this constitutes an important element of the argument that is developed below. Our postgraduate sample was, however, significantly more socially diverse and included many more students from lower socio-economic groups and who had experienced more varied educational histories. Of the 54 interviewees in this group, only 12 had attended an independent school.

Respondents were asked during the interview about their previous educational history, family life and activities outside of school/college. The interviews also covered, in more detail, their reasons for becoming interested in overseas education, the particular countries and institutions they had considered, the sources of information they had used, likely sources of funding, previous experiences of travel and their assessment of the similarities and differences of higher education in the UK and abroad. Those who had completed an undergraduate or postgraduate degree overseas were also asked about their experiences during their degree (both academic and social) and their lives since graduating. For this group, we were particularly interested in the extent to which they perceived they had been advantaged or disadvantaged within the labour market, as a consequence of their overseas qualification.

In the following sections of this article, we draw on this dataset to explore, firstly, the spatial distribution of overseas education and the limited range of both countries and institutions that our respondents considered. We then move on to explore the reasons for these patterns. Here we suggest that the dominance of high status institutions in English-speaking countries can be explained by the opportunity overseas education offered many of our respondents for a ‘second chance’ at accessing elite higher education.

## **The spatial distribution of student destinations**

[Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here]

Table 1 shows the very limited geographical spread of the countries considered by our sample. Only one of the sixth-formers we interviewed was thinking of studying in a country other than the United States. Although there was more variation amongst the postgraduates, there was still a clear preference for Anglophone countries and, specifically, Canada, the US and Australia. The dominance of the US, at undergraduate level, is borne out by OECD statistics (2007): it is the top destination for UK students and, in 2005, received 39.4 per cent of those who travelled abroad for tertiary education. The next two most popular countries, according to the OECD figures, are France (with 10.5 per cent) and Germany (with 9 per cent). Even amongst those who travel abroad as part of a UK degree (rather than for the whole of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree), recent statistics testify to a considerable decline in the popularity of European destinations (typically organised through Erasmus schemes). While many European countries have witnessed a steady increase in outward mobility over recent decades, the number of UK students moving to other countries through

one of the European initiatives fell from just under 10 000 in 1998-99 to 7539 in 2003-04, a lower figure than that reported over a decade earlier of just under 9000 (Birtwistle, 2007). Indeed, in contrast to almost all other European Union (EU) countries, the year of highest outward mobility for UK students (on Erasmus and other EU schemes) was 1994-95 (ibid.). This general decline in the number of students choosing to study in European countries has been largely matched, however, by a corresponding increase in outward mobility to Anglophone countries and other destinations. Findlay et al. (2006) suggest that this shift in preferences can be explained by the decline in the linguistic abilities of British students, the perceived high standards and marketability of American and other Anglophone education systems, and the increasing prevalence of travel to long haul destinations during gap years. Again though, the range of countries to which students travel is limited: four English speaking nations (Canada, the US, Australia and New Zealand) account for 60 per cent of non-Erasmus mobility (ibid.).

Within our sample, the dominance of a small number of English speaking countries is clear. Beyond this, however, we also witnessed the dominance of a narrow group of institutions; typically those of a very high status and which are ranked highly within international league tables (e.g. THES, 2007) (see Table 2). This was evident amongst both the undergraduate sample and their postgraduate counterparts, and emerged as a clear theme in the interviews: most respondents had been keenly aware of status differentials and had considered only those institutions with an extremely good reputation. The comments below were typical:

[I applied to] Harvard, Yale, Princeton or Stanford. Any other universities that were less famous, I was not so keen on. (Qing, completed undergraduate degree at Harvard)

I'm applying to Stanford, Harvard, Columbia, UCLA, UCB and Princeton. (Sabina, sixth-former)

Wesleyan College, Williams, Duke, Brown, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, I think that's it, seven it should have been. (Linda, sixth-former)

This dominance of high status US institutions is discussed by Marginson (2008) in his analysis of patterns of worldwide higher education. He argues that there are two elements to the global higher education domain: firstly, the flows – of people, ideas and resources – and secondly, the patterns of difference that channel and limit these global flows. These patterns can promote horizontal diversity, for example in terms of different languages of study, pedagogies and cultures, but also vertical diversity such as hierarchies of institutions and subjects of study. In taking his analysis of vertical diversity further, Marginson draws on the work of Bourdieu to suggest that the global field of higher education is structured by ‘an opposition between the elite sub-field of restricted production, and the sub-field of large scale mass production’ (p.305). The elite sub-field, he suggests, is comprised of institutions such as the top American universities and Oxbridge, whose global power ‘rests on the sub-ordination of other institutions and nations’ (ibid.). US hegemony, in particular, he contends, is underpinned by: the global use of English; research concentration and knowledge flows; and its success as a ‘people attractor’, through offering superior salaries for staff and scholarships for students. Thus, he claims that the dominance of the US within the field of higher education is akin to its global hegemony in other areas such as media, finance and technology. The attraction of the US to British students may also be partially explained by its perceived ‘safeness’ and similarity, in some respects, to ‘home’. In exploring the mobility of young New Zealanders to the UK, Conradson and Latham (2005) have made similar



arguments, suggesting that London ‘mediates many of the uncertainties associated with the act of migrating’ (p.293) and one of its key attractions as a potential destination is that ‘it doesn’t demand that things get too experimental’ (ibid.). Our respondents’ narratives suggest that similar assessments may have underpinned their desire to move to the US (but also other Anglophone destinations such as Canada and Australia).

Evidence of this US dominance is clearly played out within our sample and, as Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate, the spatial distribution of destinations is far from ‘global’ in its spread. This uneven geography of international higher education has much in common with Sassen’s (2006) arguments about global cities: just as she argues that with the increasing transnational articulation among a significant number of key ‘global cities’, those left outside become peripheralised, our data suggest that the geography of higher education is equally stratified. The most powerful and wealthy nations are those that are most attractive to UK students, and thus benefit from their mobility, while those outside this nexus (notably Africa and parts of Asia) are potentially disadvantaged as a result.

Our data also articulates with research that has been conducted on the geography of schooling and higher education within the UK. In their analysis of patterns of compulsory schooling in London, Ball and colleagues (1997) have pointed to the ways in which different social classes tend to colonise different types of institution or educational ‘circuits’. Reay et al. (2005) have made similar arguments in relation to the tertiary sector, contending that while privately educated students tend to dominate Oxbridge, and middle class students identify most strongly with pre-1992 redbrick universities, their working class counterparts feel most at home in post-1992 ‘new’ universities. In both analyses spatial factors are significant. Indeed, Ball et al. suggest that different social classes have different capacities to overcome what

Harvey (1989) has called the ‘friction of distance’, with those from higher socio-economic groups having fewer material and psychic constraints on moving further afield to secure an ‘appropriate’ education. This is borne out by official data on university admissions which suggest that high achievers from privileged social backgrounds typically choose within *national* markets of high status universities while those from lower socio-economic groups engage with much more localised markets of less prestigious institutions (UCAS, 2000). Our analysis develops this work further by suggesting that a small minority of highly privileged young people are choosing within *global* markets of tertiary education – in which a failure to secure access to an elite institution within the UK does not lead to a shift ‘downwards’ to a less prestigious circuit, but merely a movement ‘sideways’ to a similarly-ranked institution in another country. This is explained in more detail below.

### **A second chance at ‘success’**

In Szelenyi’s (2006) research on process of migratory decision-making amongst international students in the US, she argues that such processes of choice are complex and ‘take place at the confluence of a multitude of internal and external factors, including personal and professional aspirations, informal and formal social ties, access to information...and the subtle and not so subtle influence of the state and its institutions’ (p.205). This complexity was certainly evident within our sample; indeed, we have argued elsewhere that decisions to pursue an overseas education were often inextricably bound up with, for example, family connections abroad, a desire to secure permanent residency in another country and/or previous experiences of travel (Authors, 2008). However, a significant majority of our respondents were also strongly motivated by the desire gain entry to an elite higher education

institution and, for a considerable number, this appeared to be a key factor in their decision-making.

As noted above, when making their decisions, nearly all our young adults were or had been sensitive to the status of the institutions they were considering. This was, however, configured rather differently at undergraduate and postgraduate levels: those contemplating undergraduate study abroad were concerned primarily with the reputation of the university as a whole. At postgraduate level, more attention was paid to the reputation of the specific department in which respondents wanted to study (but often alongside concern at the status of the institution more generally).

Indeed, for many of our sample, overseas education was seen to offer an opportunity to gain access to an elite university that had been closed off in the UK and, thus, a second chance at what they perceived to be 'success'. Many of these young people had been educated at private schools within the UK where almost all students progressed to high status universities and where they, themselves, had come to believe that only an 'Oxbridge' education was good enough for them. There are numerous examples of this kind of reasoning within our dataset but here we focus on only a small number of illustrative cases. Linda had attended a top independent school for girls where there was a lot of pressure (from both staff and fellow students) to gain entry to only very prestigious institutions. Her decision to explore overseas opportunities had been stimulated by what she perceived to be her 'failure' in her A Level examinations: attaining a 'B' grade in English, instead of the 'A' she had been expecting.

Oxford and Cambridge....everyone [at my school] always assumes that you're going to apply to Oxbridge, they talk about which colleges are you applying to and it's like

‘I’m not going to’ and they’re like ‘Oh why not?’ It happens that I’m not really applying to Oxbridge because of my grades, but I mean you make up an excuse like ‘Oh I didn’t really like it’ and they’re like ‘Oh why, why? It’s so amazing, it’s such a different lifestyle.’

I mean I didn’t think of applying to America until after my gap year, sort of because of my grades.

I wanted to study English eventually but in my A Levels I got a B, so granted it was a high B but it’s not good enough to get me in to any universities here to do straight English.

At the time of interview, she was intending to apply to a range of Ivy League colleges, including Brown, Princeton, Harvard and Yale. Linda’s story is mirrored, in many respects, by that given by Jessica, another sixth-former who had also attended a high-achieving private school for girls, but in another part of the UK. While she was still at school, she had applied to six high status British universities and had secured offers from five of them, one of which included a £6000 bursary from a private sector sponsor. However, as she had set her heart on studying at Oxford (the only place to reject her), she decided to take a ‘gap year’ after her A Levels and reapply, with the hope of being more successful the second time round. It was during this time that she began to think about some American universities as an ‘acceptable’ alternative to Oxford:

In the summer I was, I had decided, I’d got my A Level results and I was like right I’m going to, I definitely want to take a gap year, I’d decided on that, I definitely want

to re-apply [to Oxford], this is what I want to do. And as I was looking at places in England that I wanted to re-apply to, I was looking at league tables and I was just looking at an international league table and then I just thought to myself, well that would be quite interesting if I did that.

For Linda, like with many others, status was key to her decision-making:.

*OK, so how important was the reputation or status of the universities that you've chosen?*

I think that was the main reason why I've chosen the universities that I'm going to apply to because ...

*So which ones have you chosen?*

I'm only applying to three, I'm applying to Harvard, Princeton and Yale.

Although reasoning like this seemed to be associated with a particular private school ethos which appeared to devalue attending anything other than an elite institution, similar views were also expressed by a small number of pupils who had attended much less high-attaining state schools. Kamil, for example, was a student at a co-educational sixth-form college in inner London which, though very well thought of, had a mixed intake and certainly did not expect all its students to progress to higher education. Nevertheless, Kamil had extremely high expectations of himself and was very disappointed by his failure to get into Oxford, even though he had been offered a place at a number of other well-established universities:

*Yeah, so even though you've got places at Sheffield, Leicester and Exeter, do you not want any of those?*

They weren't really my top choices. I really wanted, in terms of like going to a uni in the UK, I wanted to go to Oxford.... I always imagine myself going to like a place which had like a lot of prestige or whatever; it's kind of like my own expectation of myself. And despite the fact that I had, I've got like three other offers .... I still try and work somehow to get myself to a better uni because I don't, I think it's just something that I have in my own mindset that I don't see myself going to a mediocre uni, even though Sheffield and Exeter aren't mediocre, but I think I've always just imagined myself going to somewhere a bit better.

For him, the only acceptable substitute for Oxford appeared to be high status US colleges: Harvard, Brown, Stanford and Yale. Indeed, Kamil implied that if he was unsuccessful in his US applications as well, he would take some time out and reapply rather than studying at what he perceived to be a 'lesser' institution:

[Not going to university is] a possibility, kind of because I got rejected by two of my top unis, I got rejected by Oxford and I got rejected by Durham and kind of at the moment it's just like if I don't get a place in the States I don't feel like going to uni for the first year anyway, maybe trying to re-apply, that's kind of just the main reason.

For Linda, Jessica, Kamil and the many others like them in the sample, it was not an overseas education *per se* that had attracted them. Instead, it was the opportunity it offered for a 'second chance' at gaining access to highly elite higher education. Indeed, although many respondents talked in very positive terms about the wider benefits of studying in the States, a considerable number indicated that their first preference would have been to stay in the UK and study at Oxford or Cambridge. In many ways, these findings reflect Bourdieu's (1996)

observations about the emergence of new institutes of management in France. He claimed that the institute ‘provides a second chance, as it were, to students who have not received from the academic world the recognition they had been anticipating ...’ (p. 217). He goes on to describe these institutes as ‘honourable substitutes’ for the most prestigious qualifications. This is what we have found in relation to international education – that in many cases it provided an *honourable substitute* to Oxbridge for high achieving, high aspiring students.

Amongst our postgraduate sample, such accounts were relatively rare. Nevertheless, an overseas education was believed to offer a second chance in another respect: in providing opportunities for securing postgraduate funding, when students had been unsuccessful in UK competitions. For example, Helen described how she had been turned down for funding for a PhD by the relevant UK research council, but then had been encouraged by one of her undergraduate tutors to have a ‘second go’ at a PhD application to the European Union Institute in Florence (where funding was provided by the British government).

This use of international education as a ‘second chance’ has been noted in other parts of the world. In her research in Hong Kong, Author B (2006) has argued that international schools can operate as ‘middle class sanctuaries’, providing a means of escaping failure in the highly competitive state system for those families who can afford to pay for their child’s education. Such schools, she suggests, also provide an important stepping stone for overseas education. Similarly, Wiers-Jenssen (2008) argues that for specific groups of Norwegian students applying for over-subscribed degree courses such as medicine, studying overseas can offer an alternative for those who fail to secure a place at home. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the literature has pointed to the status of overseas education as a *first choice* for those wishing to maximise their cultural capital, bestowing considerably greater advantage than a domestic

higher education (Huang and Yeoh, 2005; Morano-Foadi, 2005; Ong, 1999; Rizvi, 2000). Thus, while Rivza and Teichler (2007) argue that overseas education may be losing its appeal ‘because study in another country gradually loses its exceptionality as compared to the general experiences of internationalisation and globalisation affecting the daily life of others’ (p.473), we would suggest that, for UK students at least, it is not the ‘exceptionality’ of such experiences that is the main motivating factor but, rather, the opportunity to gain access to elite institutions, when such routes have been closed down (or are at least perceived in this way) within the students’ home country.

### **Networks of privilege: the importance of institutional habitus**

In his analysis of the field of global higher education, discussed above, Marginson (2008) argues that the global should not be seen as a discrete space of its own. Instead, he contends that ‘it sits alongside the national and local spaces and connects with them at many points’ (p.313). The narratives of our respondents highlight a similar degree of connection between the ways in which compulsory education is structured in the (national) UK education system and decisions young people make in relation to an overseas education. In particular, our research points to a close association between elite schools and colleges in the UK and prestigious higher education institutions overseas. As noted above, in some of the schools attended by our respondents, there were strong expectations that only high status universities were suitable destinations for degree-level study. This then fed into calculations about pursuing an overseas education to gain a ‘second chance’ at success, as discussed previously. However, this association also worked in more direct ways. Indeed, a number of the young people in our sample who were attending, or had attended top independent schools spoke of



the significant encouragement and support they had received in their decision to pursue higher education abroad. For example, the schools attended by both Linda and Yunna both welcomed a number of outreach officers from Ivy League colleges:

We went to a couple of meetings, I met someone from, before I decided to apply, I met a couple of people from Yale and Princeton, generally it was the larger universities that came over to our school. I met somebody from Duke, I can't really remember, but then again when I decided to apply, because they come every year ....So I met them again when I decided to apply and we could actually go and meet them properly, the people who are the admissions officers for England, I'd already met the ones for Yale which is quite a nice feeling, hopefully made a good impression. (Linda, sixth-former)

Oh, Brown actually visited my school and gave a talk and I actually considered it from them on.... So after that talk I seriously considered it and took the SATs along with my A Levels and you know started applying. (Yunna, studied as an undergraduate at Brown)

Furthermore, Qing (who studied as an undergraduate at Harvard) described how, at her school, 'pre-SATs' were offered to all students as a matter of course, to introduce them to the selection procedure used by American institutions. Doing well at this type of exam could encourage students to consider study in the US as a serious option, as in Qing's case:

I seriously started thinking about it when, I think I was about fifteen or sixteen, we took a pre-SAT test to see how we would do in the SAT. That was just offered by [my school] and I decided to take it just to see what kind of exam that was. And after that point I seriously started looking at schools and preparing for tests.

*Was there any pressure or any encouragement to do that test?*

No, there wasn't at all, it was just told to people in my year that the test would be available

This high level of institutional support was complemented, in some schools and colleges, by more informal mechanisms. For example, Linda described how, at her school, there was a tradition of applying to Ivy League colleges, as a 'back up' in case Oxbridge applications were unsuccessful: 'I think there were about, from my school, say five who went this year to America....a lot more apply and then don't often don't take their place if they get into Oxbridge'. Yunna also spoke of a critical mass of friends who were considering overseas higher education, and how this had had a positive impact on her own decision-making process. Amongst our respondents who had attended highly regarded schools (state as well as independent), there was also a belief that US colleges paid more attention to extra-curricular activities than their British counterparts, and so may be easier to access for students with a wide array of talents (often inculcated by their school). Indeed, many of our young adults seemed to think that there was a close correspondence between the way in which extra-curricular activities were strongly encouraged in their schools and the value accorded to them in the US higher education system. Darren, a sixth-former who had applied to a range of prestigious American institutions in case his Oxford application was unsuccessful, claimed that:

Over in America it's like if your SAT scores might be slightly lower, what have you got to compensate for that? So if you've got really good extra curriculars then you know it's about you as a whole person, which is what I guess I don't think the British universities take into account very much.

Some scholars have suggested recently that a period living abroad is increasingly available for a diverse mix of people, 'becoming a normal and almost taken-for-granted part of the life cycle' (Conradson and Latham, 2005, p.288). Indeed, Conradson and Latham argue, on the basis of their study of young New Zealanders living in London, that 'their particular embodiments of relative youth, mobility and middlingness...suggest a need to reconsider some of the established categories of individual and group mobility employed in the transnational migrant literatures' (ibid, p.290), which have tended to focus on either global elites, the 'transnational capitalist class' (Sklair, 2001) on one hand, or unskilled labour migrants, on the other. Our research, however, points to the continuing importance of social class in facilitating mobility, and the privileged nature of many of the British young people who seek an overseas education. As such, it supports other studies of student mobility, which have highlighted enduring differences by social position in propensity to travel. For example, drawing on their work with Chinese students studying in Australia, Singh et al (2007) argue that 'travelling cultures' are not available to everyone and are strongly inflected by class and gender. Moreover, focussing on the UK in particular, Findlay et al (2006) have argued that while there has always been an association between mobility for education and privilege, this relationship is becoming stronger, with overseas education 'increasingly becoming a property of the more well-off students...leaving the majority socially, financially and linguistically excluded' (p.313).

We have highlighted, not only the fact that many of our sample of mobile students came from privileged backgrounds, with many having attended very highly-regarded independent or state schools, but also the institutional factors that facilitated an overseas education. These operated at two levels: firstly, the provision of practical support through talks by visiting representatives and 'pre-SATs' and, secondly, the less direct, informal sources of

encouragement, such as a tradition of sending students to particular institutions, informal networks between individuals and/or schools in the UK and overseas universities, and a perception of similarity in institutional ethos (particularly in relation to attitudes towards extra-curricular activities). Thus, we would suggest that ‘institutional habitus’ (Reay et al., 2001) has an important impact on the configuration of choices, in some cases over and above that of families. By drawing attention to these local factors, we demonstrate the importance of ‘networks of privilege’ in facilitating international mobility for many of the young people in our sample and concur with Holton (2008) who argues that, while there is a widely held view that cosmopolitanism involves the emergence of a decontextualised set of global actors, ‘it is not clear that either power or mobility displace sense of place or obliterate context, whether local or national’ (p.199). Our data highlights the significance of localised institutional habitus in facilitating access to overseas education and, in particular, to elite global ‘circuits’.

## **Conclusion**

The extant literature on student migration has pointed to the value of an overseas education *per se* in conferring advantage over other students in possession of ‘only’ a degree awarded from a domestic institution. However, this body of work has typically focussed on students moving from east to west and on what Rivza and Teichler (2007) call ‘vertical mobility’: mobility in pursuit of what is deemed to be a ‘better’ (or at least more prestigious) form of education. In its focus on the motivations and movements of UK students, our research has highlighted a different type of mobility. For the majority of respondents in our study, enrolling at an overseas university was not seen as a better option than remaining within the UK, but as a means of compensating for perceived failure within the domestic system and of

providing a second chance at ‘success’. Here, however, it is important to emphasise the very narrow terms in which both failure and success were defined: largely in relation to gaining access to highly elite higher education institutions. Indeed, compared to the vast majority of students in the UK, our respondents had had highly successful academic careers and most had secured entry to very well-regarded UK universities. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1996) work, we have argued that, in many ways, an elite overseas education was perceived as an ‘honourable substitute’ for an Oxbridge degree in a highly stratified higher education sector and an increasingly competitive graduate labour market. This type of student movement has much in common with what Rivza and Teichler (2007) term ‘horizontal mobility’: migration to neighbouring countries with similar types of higher education system and strong commonalities in cultural background. However, our research also suggests that the term ‘horizontal’ may be a little misleading: overseas universities were not seen as precisely equivalent to their UK counterparts. Even institutions such as Harvard, Yale and Princeton were rarely chosen as a first choice destination; in most cases they became attractive only *after* a rejection by Oxford or Cambridge.

Our research has also highlighted the importance of ‘global circuits’ of tertiary institutions to a small but significant group of UK students. While studies to date have emphasised the differential abilities of social groups to overcome the ‘friction of distance’ within the UK higher education market (Reay et al., 2005), our work has thrown into sharp relief the global framework within which a small minority of highly privileged young men and women are making their university choices. The spatial reach of these global circuits is, however, highly circumscribed, focussing mainly on Anglophone countries and the US, in particular. In highlighting the very privileged nature of many of the young people who move abroad for their higher education, our research offers some support for Castells’ (2000) distinction

between the ‘space of flows’ (and ensuing cosmopolitanism) ‘from above’ and the ‘space of place’ and enduring localism evident ‘from below’. Although his work has been criticised for exaggerating this divide (e.g. Holton, 2008; Sassen, 2006), our research suggests that the mobility of UK students is, in many cases, underpinned by clear networks of privilege, which help to facilitate overseas education.

More generally, our research raises questions about the extent to which moving abroad for higher education can be seen as in keeping with wider discourses about youth travel. For example, drawing on their data on student migration within Europe, King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003) contend that ‘students who choose to study abroad are taking a significant step in setting in motion their own individualised life projects’ (p.245), suggesting that there are strong similarities between educational migration and other forms of youth mobility – such as gap year travel. However, our data indicate that while young people choosing to study abroad are certainly not following a ‘standard biography’, they are not necessarily carving out individualised pathways for themselves. Rather, they are finding an alternative means to secure an elite education, which they would perhaps have preferred to follow in the UK.

## References

Ball, S., Bowe, R. and Gewirtz, S. (1997) 'Circuits of Schooling: a sociological exploration of parental choice of school in social-class contexts', in A. Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown and A. S. Wells (eds) *Education: Culture, Economy, Society*, pp. 409 – 421. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Birtwistle, T. (2007) *European and European Union Dimensions to Mobility*, in: Jones, E. and Brown, S. (eds) *Internationalising Higher Education* London, Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1996) *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power* Stanford California, Stanford University Press.

Brown, P. and Hesketh, A. (2004) *The Mismanagement of Talent. Employability and Jobs in the Knowledge Economy* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Castells, M. (2000) *The Rise of the Network Society* Oxford, Blackwell.

Clark, T. (2006) A free lunch in Uppsala, *The Guardian*, 24 October 2006.

Conradson, D. and Latham, A. (2005) Friendship, networks and transnationality in a world city: antipodean transmigrants in London, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31, 2, 287-305.

Findlay, A., King, R., Stam, A. and Ruiz-Gelices, E. (2006) Ever reluctant Europeans: the changing geographies of UK students studying and working abroad *European Urban and Regional Studies* 13, 4, 291 – 318.

Harvey, D. (1989) *The Condition of Post Modernity* Oxford, Blackwell.

Holton, R. (2008) *Global Networks* Basingstoke, Palgrave.

Huang, S. and Yeoh, B. (2005) Transnational families and their children's education: China's "study mothers" in Singapore, *Global Networks* 5, 4, 379 – 400.

Institute of International Education (2007) *Open Doors Fast Facts*

[http://www.opendoors.iienetwork.org/file\\_depot/0-10000000/0-](http://www.opendoors.iienetwork.org/file_depot/0-10000000/0-10000/3390/folder/58653/Fast+Facts+2007+Final.pdf)

[10000/3390/folder/58653/Fast+Facts+2007+Final.pdf](http://www.opendoors.iienetwork.org/file_depot/0-10000/3390/folder/58653/Fast+Facts+2007+Final.pdf) (Accessed 29/8/08)

King, R. and Ruiz-Gelices, R. (2003) International student migration and the European 'year-abroad': effects on European identity and subsequent migration behaviour, *International Journal of Population Geography* 9, 3, 229 – 252.

Mazlish, B. and Morss, E. (2005) A Global Elite? In: Chandler, A. and Mazlish, B. (eds) *Leviathans. Multinational Corporations and the New Global History* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Marginson, S. (2008) Global field and global imagining: Bourdieu and worldwide high education, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29, 3, 303-315.



Morano-Foadi, S. (2005) Scientific mobility, career progression, and excellence in the European Research Area *International Migration* 43, 5, 133 – 162.

Murphy-Lejeune, E. (2002) *Student Mobility and Narrative in Europe. The new strangers* London, Routledge.

OECD (2007) *Education at a Glance* OECD Publications.

Ong, A. (1999) *Flexible Citizenship: the cultural logics of transnationality* Durham, Duke University Press.

Reay, D., David, M. and Ball, S. (2001) Making a Difference?: Institutional Habituses and Higher Education Choice, *Sociological Research Online*, 5, 4 <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/5/4/reay.html>> (Accessed 29/8/08).

Reay, D., David, M. and Ball, S. (2005) *Degrees of Choice. Social class, race and gender in higher education* London, Trentham Books.

Rivza, B. and Teichler, U. (2007) The changing role of student mobility, *Higher Education Policy*, 20, 457-475.

Rizvi, F. (2000) International Education and the Production of Global Imagination, in Burbules, N. and Torres, C. (eds) *Globalisation and Education. Critical Perspectives* New York, Routledge.

Sassen, S. (2006) *Cities in a World Economy* (third edition) Thousand Oaks, Pine Forge Press.

Shepherd, J. (2006) UK Students Drawn to US for Broad-Based Degrees, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 4 August 2006.

Singh, M., Rizvi, F. and Shrestha, M. (2007) Student mobility and the spatial production of cosmopolitan identities, in: Gulson, K. and Symes, C. (eds) *Spatial Theories of Education. Policy and Geography Matters* New York, Routledge.

Sklair, L. (2001) *The Transnational Capitalist Class* Oxford, Blackwell.

Sussex Centre for Migration Research (2004) *International Student Mobility*. University of Sussex.

Szelenyi, K. (2006) Students without Borders? Migratory decision-making among international graduate students in the US, in: Smith, M. and Favell, A. (eds) *The Human Face of Global Mobility* New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Publishers.

Teichler, U. (2004) The changing debate on internationalisation of higher education, *Higher Education*, 48, 5-26.

Times Higher Education Supplement (2007) *World University Rankings*  
<http://www.thes.co.uk/worldrankings/> (Accessed 21 /11/07).

UCAS (2000) *More students apply to stay at home*. Press release issued on 21/7/00.

Wiers-Jenssen, J. (2008) Does higher education attained abroad lead to international jobs?,  
*Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12, 2, 101-130.

Wolf, A. (2002) *Does Education Matter? Myths about education and economic growth*  
London, Penguin.

Table 1: Number of respondents who had studied in/were seriously considering studying in specific countries

Country	Number of respondents			
	Sixth-formers considering an UG degree overseas  N=20	Those who had completed an UG degree overseas  N=11	Undergraduates considering a PG degree overseas  N=20	Those who had completed a PG degree overseas  N=34
Australia	0	0		5
Belgium	0	0		2
Canada	0	2		9
Finland	0	0		1
France	1	1		1
Germany	0	0		1
Hong Kong	0	0		0
Ireland	0	1		0
Italy	0	0		6
Japan	0	1		0
Netherlands	0	0		0
New Zealand	0	0		0
Singapore	0	0		0
South Africa	0	1		2
Sweden	0	0		1
Taiwan	0	0		0
United States	20	5		8

NB Totals for the first and third columns sum to more than 20 as some respondents were seriously considering more than one country at the time of interview.

Table 2: Number of respondents by ranking of university they were interested in/had studied at

Rank of university in THES 'Global League Table'	Number of respondents			
	Sixth-formers considering an UG degree overseas  N=20	Those who had completed an UG degree overseas  N=11	Undergraduates considering a PG degree overseas  N=20	Those who had completed a PG degree overseas  N=34
1-10		3		2
11-50		1		17
51-200		2		2
201+ (but see note below)		5		13

NB Totals for the first and third columns sum to more than 20 as some respondents were seriously considering more than one institution at the time of interview.

The College of Europe and the European University Institute make up a significant proportion of those in the '201+' category, but are both regarded as high status institutions.