

Making the Choice: Educational Mobility Decisions of International Doctoral Students

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Abstract : International doctoral mobility is a largely under-researched component of academic mobility and migration. This is in stark contrast to the case of student mobility where much research has been undertaken on Erasmus students; or the growing research on academic staff mobility which can be viewed as a key part of highly skilled migration. The aim of this paper is to remedy the situation by specifically focusing on international doctoral students studying at elite higher education institutions in the United Kingdom. In doing so, in-depth qualitative interviews with doctoral students and recent graduates were carried out in order to identify the signifiers of an internationally mobile doctoral student and unpack the decision-making processes leading onto the choice of higher education institution abroad. Overall, a diverse range of degree subjects from within the humanities and the social sciences were covered with a relatively large spread of nationalities which include the following countries: Italy, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Australia, USA, China, and Chile. The interview questions were designed to probe the motivations, choices, educational trajectories and career plans of international doctoral students relative to their social class background, gender, nationality or funding. It was clear from the interviews that there were two main types of international doctoral students: those who 'did not think anything else was ever a serious possibility', contrasted with the other, more opportune type, to whom 'it happened to be a PhD'. There were marked differences between the two types since initial access to university, mainly because educational decisions such as the doctorate do not happen in a vacuum, rather are built on the individual's higher education aspirations and previous educational choices. The results were in line with existing literature suggesting that those with higher educated parents and from schools strongly supporting the choice process fared better as they were able to make well informed, well thought through as well as strategic decisions for their future involving the very best universities within the national boundaries. Being 'at the right place' often meant access to prestigious doctoral scholarships thus, the route of the PhD has been chosen even if it did not necessarily enhance career opportunities. At the same time, the initial higher education choices of those with limited capital were played out locally, although they did aim for the best universities within their geographically constrained landscape of choice. Here, the majority of students referred to some 'turning points' in their lives which lead them towards considering international doctoral opportunities but essentially their proactive, do-it-yourself attitude was behind the life-changing educational opportunities.

Keywords : choice, doctoral students, international mobility, PhD, UK

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