

Mobile agency and relational webs in women's narratives of international study

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Abstract

Internationalisation and forced migration are rarely thought about as related phenomena in higher education (HE) literature. Internationalisation is associated with movement, choice and brand recognition, and used in international rankings methodologies as a proxy for quality. Forced migration is associated with movement, but also with lack of choice, containment, or 'stuckness'. Some scholars have called for a rethinking of 'the international' through attention to students as mobile agents, and international study situated within broader mobile lives. Our study responded to these calls through exploring the educational biographies of 37 international and refugee-background women students based in two universities: 21 in New Zealand, and 16 in Bangladesh. Ten of the women were from refugee or refugee-like backgrounds, while the remainder, were international students. The women's accounts revealed the complex ways in which circumstances shaped their educational journeys similarly and differently. One woman represented mobility in relation to autonomy and choice; but most emphasised relational webs as shaping their access to and experiences of international study, and post-study aspirations. In this paper, we draw on selected narratives to illustrate the range of ways in which family and/or community members appeared in women's accounts of their education journeys: as a source of (1) sustenance and support; (2) inspiration and motivation; and (3) obligation, and sometimes, regulation. We conclude by suggesting that attention to the affective and embodied entanglements that shape students' international study journeys might inform new ways of thinking about both 'the international' and higher education more broadly.

Keywords: Internationalisation; Forced migration; Refugee; Higher education; New Zealand; Bangladesh; Relationality

Introduction

Internationalisation and forced migration have generally been considered separately in higher education (HE) literature (exceptions include King and Raghuram 2013; Wu and Wilkes 2017). Internationalisation is associated with movement, choice and brand recognition, and used in international rankings methodologies as a proxy for quality (Knight 2014). Forced migration, while also associated with movement, connotes a level of 'stuckness', or lack of choice in relation to when, how, and to where one moves (Jefferson et al. 2019). The past two decades have been marked by contradictory human mobilities —unprecedented levels of human movement of many kinds, *and* the hardening of national borders in many contexts (Hammerstad 2014; Pickering 2004; Lambrechts 2020). Our use of parentheses in the title of the paper is intended to highlight this contradiction. Many countries have competed to attract

mobile students as ‘human capital’ and revenue (Knight 2014; for example, see New Zealand Government 2017). However, forcibly displaced students remain precariously positioned in relation to HE (Lambrechts 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only three percent of eligible refugees globally gained access to HE (<https://www.unhcr.org/tertiary-education.html>), compared with an overall youth access rate of around 38 percent (UNESCO 2018).

The current pandemic has caused the closure of many national borders and a dramatic reduction in global air travel. This shift in global mobility problematises previous distinctions between those who are free to move, and those who are not. Although our study pre-dated the emergence of COVID-19, we offer this paper at what we see as a critical juncture — when unfettered movement can no longer be taken-for-granted by the privileged few, and revenue generation through the recruitment and enrolment of fee-paying international students is no longer guaranteed. Our paper invites reflection on the purpose and outcomes of HE (after King and Raghuram 2013; Madge et al. 2015), in light of 37 women’s biographical narratives of educational mobility and immobility.

Our study (conducted in 2018) explored 37 women’s educational biographies as international and refugee-background students in two universities: 21 in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), and 16, in Bangladesh. Our work adds to the growing body of scholarship focused on questions of ethics, care, and responsibility in, and in relation to, internationalised HE (Madge et al. 2015; Raghuram et al. 2009; Madge et al. 2009; Tran and Vu 2017). It also adds to scholarship which contests representations of refugee-background students solely in terms of trauma or difficulty (Vickers et al. 2017), while recognising how hard borders are entrenched and re-entrenched through structural and everyday practices that alienate (Lambrechts 2020; Tofighian 2018). Theoretically, our paper extends notions of mobile agency (Madge et al. 2015) and self-formation (Marginson 2014; Tran 2016) by foregrounding the profound role of relational webs or ‘entanglements’ that shape students’ choices, actions, and sense-making in enabling and constraining ways. We are interested in how mobility and immobility are lived and felt in embodied and relational ways (Anderson 2012; Anderson et al. 2018; King and Raghuram 2013; Mahler and Pessar 2001), and in international study as more than a series of “unfettered spatial movements” (Waters 2016, p. 280). Our focus on women counters gender-blind representations of international study that render (some) women’s voices inaudible or position women primarily in deficit terms in relation to internationalised HE (Anderson 2014; Madge et al. 2009; King and Raghuram 2013). Notably, we do not see ‘women’ as a bounded, monolithic category (Rhee 2006). One of our aims in this paper is to foreground the diversity of women’s lives.

It is necessary to explain our use of the terms ‘refugee-background’ and ‘international student’ in this paper. The UN 1951 Refugee Convention defines as a refugee “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR 2010, p. 3). States that sign the Convention agree to “accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education . . . [and] treatment as favourable as possible . . . with respect to education other than elementary education” (p. 24). Although, in some senses, our study problematised simplistic categories such as ‘international student’ and ‘refugee’, for recruitment purposes we defined as refugee-background students those who had been granted formal refugee status (all of the NZ based refugee-background students); and students who were stateless or displaced (most of the Bangladesh-based refugee-background students). We defined as ‘international students’ any students who had moved countries in order to study and who were not from refugee-backgrounds (as described above).

The paper is structured as follows. We begin by situating our study in relation to existing HE literature focused on international and refugee-background students, and women students in particular. We then describe our theoretical framework, study contexts and methodology. Next, we consider how ‘mobile agency’ emerged in the women’s narratives — in one case, in relation to autonomy, choice and freedom; but in most, as shaped by family, and sometimes, community relationships. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our study.

International and refugee background students, and women in (inter)nationalised HE

International and refugee-background students alike move across geographical borders in order to live and/or study (King and Raghuram 2013). However, as King and Raghuram note, academic literature rarely considers the complex ways in which mobile students are positioned differently in HE. Specific tropes are associated with international versus refugee-background students, or refugee-background peoples. For example, international students are positioned in relation to a Western supremacist imaginary in which “the West is understood to be at the top of a global hierarchy of humanity with the rest of the world trailing behind” (Stein and Andreotti 2016). Within this way of imagining internationalised HE, “Western education” is “a desirable product”, and international students, a source of “cash” and human capital (p. 231; also see Anderson 2014). International students are also positioned as “competition” (to local students), and as objects of “charity”, for example, as aid recipients (p. 234). In NZ, international students are positioned in contradictory ways — as a (desirable) source of revenue; a resource to promote ‘local’ students’ engagement with ‘difference’; and as (deficient) ‘outsiders’ (Anderson 2013; 2014). On the other hand, refugee-background students are largely represented in HE literature in relation to “their difficulties” (Vickers et al. 2017, p. 198). Tofighian (2018) identifies six “damaging tropes” used to represent refugee-background people: a “caged person” who has “escaped to the West”; a “desperate supplicant”; a “struggling overcomer” or “battler”; a “tragic and miserable victim”; a “broken human being”; and a “mystic sage” or “trickster” (p. 535).

Tofighian argues that tropes reflect essentialised idea(l)s that are damaging in their effects, and calls for interpretations grounded in engagement with the “epistemic resources” of refugee-background people themselves (p. 536). Similarly, Marginson (2014, p. 7) calls for researchers to shift from an “adjustment” to a “self-formation” paradigm in research with international students, and a focus on “the active agency of international students themselves” (p. 9). Tran (2013, p. 1269) links self-formation to mobility (defined as “fluidity, flow and dynamism”), and the divergent ways in which “international students imagine their spatial movement as producing new conditions and possibilities for the transformation of themselves and identity re-construction”.

Women are ambivalently positioned in HE. As noted in the UNHCR and Global Education Monitoring Report (2016), more women than men globally are enrolled in HE, but in low income countries, far fewer women than men access HE and far more women are illiterate. Women’s lack of access to HE then inhibits their capacity to influence healthcare provision and legal frameworks, and to access employment and leadership opportunities (UNHCR and Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016). Where women are able to access HE, gendered assumptions that valorise an ‘independent scholar’ ideal render care work and family and community commitments invisible, disproportionately impacting women (Bullen and

Kenway 2003; Johnson et al. 2000; Anderson 2012). Women's access to education is also disproportionately impacted by cultural expectations, experiences of displacement, legislative frameworks and geographical location (UNESCO 2018).

Theoretical framework

Theoretically, our study was informed by feminist scholarship that recognises the importance of women's lives (Pillow 2007) and of research that foregrounds how women make sense of their lives in relation to international study (Kenway and Bullen 2003). At the same time, we were interested in the plurality subsumed within categories such as 'women', 'international student' and 'refugee-background student' (Mohanty 2003; Tofighian 2018). We recognise that people's lives, actions, and ways of making sense of their worlds are shaped and constrained by many intersecting factors and identities (Anderson 2012; Rhee 2006). Therefore, while we conceptualised our study with a view to foregrounding women's voices in relation to international study, we were also interested in the pluralities evident in women's accounts of their education journeys, including in the people and material realities they identified as shaping these.

Our study draws on the work of Marginson (2014) and Tran (2016), who position international students as "self-forming agents who have the capability to pursue the course of life that they regard as being worth living" (Tran 2016, p. 1269). While interested in 'self-formation', both scholars recognise selves as socially situated and 'becoming' as both a social and an individual project. Tran (2016) acknowledges that international students are differently positioned in relation to educational mobility, arguing that there is "a critical need to understand the actual meanings international students and other actors involved in international education ascribe to mobility in different contexts" (p. 1270). Marginson (2014, p. 8) suggests that international study necessitates "especially strong agency" for those who engage in it, due to the "transformations and disequilibrium" involved.

Our study adds to this work through its inclusion of refugee-background women alongside international students. Marginson's (2014) notion of strong agency could be seen as particularly salient here. We find the term 'ambivalence' helpful — both mobility and agency are ambivalent for people who must navigate real and metaphorical borders (e.g. oceans, checkpoints, fences, and policy exclusion) in order to seek refuge. Borderlands scholarship recognises agency as a kind of 'necessary skilfulness' rather than individual 'choice', when people move between social worlds in which they experience degrees of marginalisation (Lugones 1987; also see Ahmed 1999; Anderson 2012). Our study was shaped by an interest in international study as involving both mobility and immobility, agency and constraint (Anderson et al. 2018; Cresswell 2010). Specifically, we were interested in women's mobility, self-formation and experiences of international study alongside the relational

entanglements that shaped their choices, or the meanings they ascribed to their study experiences and hoped-for futures (Ahmed 1999; Anderson et al. 2018; Cresswell 2010). Next, we describe our study contexts.

The study contexts

Our study took place in two very different universities — University A and University B. University A is a young liberal arts college in southern Bangladesh that (at the time of our study) provided undergraduate education for around 800 women. About 98 percent were partly or fully funded through scholarships. Most students at University A come from outside Bangladesh — many, from backgrounds of forced migration and displacement. The university provides an English language bachelors-level liberal arts education, as well as pathways and access programmes. Its explicit mandate is to produce leaders who will serve their communities following graduation.

University B is a research-intensive university which was established in NZ in the late 19th century. It enrolls around 20,000 students (men and women), and awards degrees to doctoral level. At the time of the study, around 13 percent of students were ‘international’ — studying on a student visa. Although a named equity group at the university, at the time of our study, refugee-background students were not identifiable in university admissions data. University B aspires to produce graduates with a ‘global perspective’. Service to one’s own community is not listed as an intended graduate outcome.

Both universities provide an English-medium education and teach curricula grounded largely in ‘Western’ knowledge traditions,¹ but their socio-geographical contexts are extremely different. Bangladesh — a country of around 165 million people — borders Myanmar, India, and the Bay of Bengal. National expenditure on education is relatively low, but engagement with education and educational outcomes are improving (<https://wenr.wes.org/2019/08/education-in-bangladesh>). Although Bangladesh does not feature as an ‘education provider’ country in UNESCO statistics on tertiary-level student mobility (<http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>) it is a key player in the global flow of people seeking asylum (Dryden-Peterson 2016). In 2017, Bangladesh hosted the seventh highest number of asylum seekers globally (932,200) — mostly Rohingya people fleeing Myanmar (UNHCR 2018). However, Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 2010 Refugee Convention (UNHCR 2010), and asylum seekers in Bangladesh are subject to exploitation and deprivation (Rahman 2010; Ullah 2011).

¹ We use this term in reference to knowledge traditions grounded mainly in Western European thought, while recognising notions of ‘Westernness’ as obscuring the historical and ongoing influence of ‘other’ scholarship on so-called Western European scholarship (Anderson and Johnson 2020).

In contrast, NZ is an island nation of around five million people located on the South-western rim of Oceania. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it stood out internationally for its reliance on income generated through ‘education exports’ (Lewis 2005). In 2017, “international education” (primarily, the ‘sale’ of a NZ education to full-fee paying international students) constituted “New Zealand’s fourth largest export industry” (New Zealand Government 2017, p. 2). NZ is a signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees and later (1967) Protocol (UNHCR 2010). People granted refugee status become permanent residents, with the same access to healthcare and education as other NZers. However, NZ accepts a very small number of refugees and asylum seekers — most, through the UNHCR quota system (officially, 1500 annually, but currently, far fewer due to pandemic-related border closures).

Our choice of these two, very different, data collection sites was partly a matter of convenience — Tiffany was a visiting scholar at Vivienne’s university, we were both actively involved in working with and advocating for international and refugee-background students, and we were interested in similar questions. However, a collaborative study also afforded the opportunity to explore whether, and in what ways, women’s narratives of international study would reveal similar and different themes in (and in relation to) two strikingly disparate locations (after Madge et al. 2015).

Methodology

Our study utilised a student-centred, qualitative approach to data collection, in line with our view of the students as “human agents” who (Marginson 2014, p. 6) can “contribute ... insights and ideas new to the research field” (p. 9). Specifically, we used narrative inquiry and biographical interviews to foreground women’s sense-making in relation to their educational journeys over time and across distinct localities (Bruner 1991; Kraus 2006; Polkinghorne 1995). Narrative inquiry is an interpretive process which allows attention to participants’ intentionality in relation to their experiences; and to time, particularity, complexity and context (Bruner 1991). Narrative inquiry allowed us to explore women’s understandings of their experiences beyond simplistic tropes of ‘international’ or ‘refugee-background’ students (see earlier). Our research questions were: (1) how do women who are international and refugee-background students make sense of their educational journeys and future aspirations, (2) how might their narratives inform policy, practice and pedagogy, and (3) in what ways, might women’s narratives expand our understandings of ‘internationalised’ HE?

We recruited participants in 2018 through personal networks, email, and posters, after obtaining ethical approvals from each university. At University A, 17 students agreed to participate, including 10 from refugee (or refugee-like) backgrounds. At University B, 21

students agreed to participate, including four who had come to NZ as refugees. Our interviews were semi-structured, and our questions, open-ended. Held as informal conversations over food, they were responsive to the students' leading. We gave students a basic interview schedule beforehand, which was chronological in its structure. Our questions invited the women to describe themselves, their families and their childhood educational aspirations; to tell us about their educational journeys to date, including factors that had been helpful or challenging in terms of their education; to describe their experiences in their current study contexts; and to discuss their aspirations for the future. We also asked the women to share any advice they would give their younger selves, and any other thoughts about their HE journeys or hoped-for futures. Some women came with prepared written responses which they used as a basis for discussion, while others responded to our questions on the spot. Each interview was audiotaped, with women's permission.

Our analytic process involved several steps. First, interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and checked with the speaker, who was invited to make adjustments as she saw fit. Then, with our research questions in mind, we analysed the transcripts in two ways: (1) by focusing on the narratives as a whole, noting the broad 'shape' of students' accounts in both a chronological and emotional sense, and (2) identifying themes and contradictions that emerged within and across them (Bruner 1991; Holloway and Freshwater 2009). Specifically, we were interested in the barriers and enablers that the women identified; women's aspirations and how these changed over time; the educational challenges and navigational strategies they mentioned; and their references to identities, embodiment, emotion, family, community, and belonging (Bruner 1991; Kraus 2006; Polkinghorne 1995). We turn now to the women's narratives.

Findings

As noted, recent scholarship has advocated for a focus on the agency of mobile students (Marginson 2014; Madge et al. 2015). The women in our study spoke as mobile agents, but agency appeared in their accounts in different ways. Most women foregrounded familial and community entanglements that shaped their actions in and experiences of HE, and their imagined futures. There was no simple distinction between women based in NZ and Bangladesh or refugee-background and international students in this regard. However, more choice and less precarity was evident in women's narratives where they held national citizenship status (sometimes, more than one), were actively supported by family members, and/or had the financial means to move. Only one NZ-based woman positioned herself as a mobile agent with largely unfettered freedom to move (Waters 2016). We begin with her narrative, and then consider the other women's accounts, in which women revealed a sense of mobile agency shaped by familial, and sometimes, community commitments. We consider

the women's narratives by theme rather than location, while highlighting contextual specificities where necessary.

Mobile agency as the freedom to move

Most women's narratives in our study illustrated the inadequacy of conflating internationalised HE with unfettered movement (Forstorp and Mellström 2013; Waters 2016), and agency with autonomy (Madge et al. 2009). Kirsten's narrative was an exception due to her confident articulation of autonomy, freedom and personal choice. Kirsten, a NZ-based participant with dual European Union and American citizenship, was born in Austria to university-educated parents, and raised in Austria and the USA. She described coming to NZ explicitly as a means to claim autonomy, since her siblings were studying in the USA and Austria: "It was going to be *my* thing and not my siblings' ... I wasn't going to be following one of their paths. It was going to be *my* path" (emphasis added). Kirsten positioned herself as a self-forming agent faced with a generous "[menu] of the possible" (Marginson 2014, p. 11).

Kirsten described her study choices in relation to imagined mobile futures, saying, "I didn't really think it mattered what I studied, as long as I studied something that I could apply that wasn't country selective". She conceptualised international study in terms of spatial *and* social mobility (Tran, 2013), as "an opportunity to go somewhere ... you can easily get somewhere with it". Kirsten's discussion of the future was imbued with a confident sense of self and easy movement. She said, "Whatever's going to happen happens and ... I'm going to be doing whatever I'm going to do. You know, if I ended up at a point where I'm not happy with what I'm doing, I'm going to change that".

While Kirsten's account revealed a comparatively autonomous sense of mobile agency (Madge et al. 2015), she also hinted at 'stickiness' that shaped her international study choices (Ahmed 2015, 2004; Anderson et al. 2018). First, she acknowledged that NZ was somewhere "my Dad would let me go to". Second, she noted, "I have this web of people around that have nothing to do with the university ... and ... that's why I'm really connected to [names city] ... because of those connections that I've made". Despite the confident sense of possibility woven throughout her narrative, Kirsten also acknowledged relationships as potentially disrupting (and permitting) her 'choice' and capacity to move (Madge et al. 2009).

Mobile agency as movement within/despite entanglements

In contrast to Kirsten, most women (36 of the 37) described family, and sometimes community obligations and/or commitments as integral to their international study ‘choices’ and imagined futures. For these women, mobile agency was integrally connected with emotional, embodied, and economic attachments (Mohanty 2003). Women described these attachments as both enabling and constraining. In this section, we draw on selected narratives to illustrate three ways in which women represented mobile agency in relation to connection with family and/or community — as a source of sustenance and support; inspiration and motivation; and obligation and regulation in relation to study and post-study ‘choices’.

Family as a source of sustenance and support

Most women represented family support as a condition of agency or possibility (Marginson 2014) — whether physically, emotionally, or both. Three Bangladesh-based refugee-background students, Rana, Somaya, and Halima, named fathers or brothers as physically enabling their studies, despite others’ disapproval. Rana’s father allowed her to escape Palestine and an arranged marriage in order to study; Somaya’s brother worked 16-hour days in Australia to support the family so she could study; and Halima’s father urged her to study, despite relatives’ view of education as unimportant for girls. The ‘choice’ of international study was costly for these women and their supporting family members despite access to scholarships. The women’s precarious citizenship status, ‘home’ environments, and/or family situations also shaped their imagined futures (Anderson et al. 2020, see more below).

Two NZ-based students described family as a critical source of emotional support. Sefina and Mariam were both first-year students — Sefina, a scholarship-funded international student from Samoa, and Mariam, a former refugee from Afghanistan. Both associated family with a sense of ‘being-at-home’ (Ahmed 1999), or affective wellbeing during international study, and as a condition of mobile agency. Mariam’s family had gained refuge in NZ four years prior to our interview, and moved with Mariam to her university city. Mariam revealed a strong sense of ‘homeliness’ due to her family’s presence (Ahmed 1999), and described proximity to family as a key consideration in relation to her imagined future. She said, “I [don’t] think of where I want to work or live, I enjoy being with my family so yeah, if they are with me, I am happy... [Home] is where people love me”. In contrast, Sefina left her family in Samoa to come and study in NZ. Here, she describes her departure:

Everybody came to see me off, not only from my Dad’s side but from my Mum’s side, all my Mum’s siblings and children so my cousins, uncles, aunties, all of them ... there was heaps of them in the airport that night. My grandparents, they all came ... I was crying ... Saying goodbye was ... very, very hard.

Sefina represents international study as an emotionally-costly, deeply-valued family investment. Her account reveals “transformation and disequilibrium” (Marginson 2014, p. 8),

due to the “movement away” from home (Ahmed 1999, p. 341). Here she recalls a period of homesickness following her departure:

I used to cry a lot ... I dealt with it my own way. I also went to see a counsellor last year about it. And then I kind of stopped eating ... And I was like losing sleep so, what happened was my cousin came, one of my boy cousins, he came over last year around August ... and it was his trip that helped me recover, yeah. So right after he left I started eating a lot.

As noted, Marginson (2014) associates international study with “especially strong agency” (p. 8), since for many students, “day-to-day self-formation ... wears the cloak of necessity, of survival and coping” (p. 13). However, Sefina represented the self as porous and relational (Ahmed 1999), not separate from others. Agency-as-coping was evident in her statement, “I dealt with it in my own way”, but she credited a cousin’s visit with recovery. In Sefina and Mariam’s accounts proximity to family was a crucial condition of a “life... worth living”, and ‘becoming’, was mediated through connection, not just departure (Tran, 2013, p. 1269).

Family (and community) as a source of inspiration and motivation

Along with Mariam, 25 women represented their futures in relation to family and community connections. These included refugee-background, fee-paying and scholarship-funded women based in NZ and Bangladesh, with connections to Vietnam, Nepal, Bhutan, India, Malaysia, Cambodia, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Samoa, NZ, the USA, and Palestine. Like some students in Tran’s (2013) Australian vocational education study, the women imagined HE as a pathway to better lives for others as well as themselves, and as equipping them to influence others’ security, health and education outcomes, not just their own. In this sense, their narratives revealed mobile agency not only as self-formation, but also the formation of families and communities (Marginson 2014; Tran, 2013).

Robertson (2010, pp. 646-647) calls for an “ethics of mobility which helps us anchor mobility in a world where social relations and social responsibilities are key to developing more cohesive and equitable globally-stratified societies”. Social relations and social responsibilities were core to many participants’ imagined post-study futures. Bangladesh-based women who were stateless or displaced at the time of our study imagined international study as a means to secure refuge and citizenship for themselves and their family members following graduation. For example, Halima, a Rohingya student studying in Bangladesh, described her family’s security as the key factor shaping her future choices, saying, “What would I look for first... which place would allow my family... We will have a kind of family vote and make a decision”. Halima represented mobile agency as grounded in collective, pragmatic action. However, she also acknowledged her access to mobile agency as contingent on national border controls. In contrast to Kirsten’s anticipation of easy movement (earlier), Halima’s account illustrated how mobility, or mobile agency, “is a resource, or source of capital, to which not everyone has an equal relationship” (Robertson 2010, p. 646).

Attention to social relations and social responsibilities (Robertson 2010) were also evident in other women's accounts. Examples in NZ were Erolia, an international dental student from Samoa, and Daisy, a postgraduate science student and former refugee from Myanmar. Erolia, described herself as having been "raised by ... a village". She linked her upbringing with her imagined future, saying "I felt very loved so I want to give back to my community, and ... maybe make a change in Samoa because we lack a lot of basic health stuff". Similarly, Daisy described having chosen to study health-related science, since her parents "didn't really have access to proper health care", saying "[it's] something ... that I can even take back". In Bangladesh, Atafah, an international student from rural Pakistan, expressed a similar sense of commitment, saying:

I want to work on the curriculum... It's very common that not all students are good at academics but might have talents in music and arts and they don't have such opportunities in our area, and their parents never encourage them to go in such a direction/field because they never saw these as an option. So I really want to work on the curriculum.

Daisy, Erolia and Atafah spoke as mobile agents intent on improving the lives of others in their communities. Notably, Atafah acknowledged the potential challenges of doing so. She explained, "If you are going to change the curriculum, then there will be bundles of people who will blame you ... for diluting the culture, girls will also be in the field of fashion, design, music". However, Atafah emphatically positioned herself as an "active social and political" agent intent on contributing to broader educational futures for girls (Robertson 2010, p. 644). She said, "I know it's tough job but I have to do it".

Family as a source of obligation and regulation

Other women also revealed a sense of obligation, and noted the regulatory power of families and communities in relation to both self and community-formation (Marginson 2014). In this, their accounts highlighted the ambivalence of mobile agency, or the inadequacy of valorising "mobility, choice and individual agency over and above any structural constraints that student migrants might face" (Waters 2016, p. 288).

Priya and Rose, Sri Lankan students based in Bangladesh and NZ respectively, were two examples. Priya and Rose imagined international study as a means to provide economic support for their families, but both described economic and other pressures as making study extremely challenging. Priya, an international student, described her parents' economic situation and health issues as shaping her study journey and future options. Despite her access to partial scholarship funding, Priya's father had sold the family land and foregone medical treatment to cover additional study costs. She explained:

I am so happy I got this opportunity and my parents also so happy; they never thought I will get this opportunity ... So I came here but, when I came here, I have so many problems ... we have to sell our land ... My father already stopped everything, medical reports, he doesn't go. If I tell, you should go and check your health, but he doesn't because he's collecting money to pay my fee. I'm so sad ... [but] ... I want to do a PhD, I want to study more and more, that's the thing, my parents want to see like that.

Priya represented international study as a source of personal and parental pride, but also as extremely costly. She expressed a deep sense of obligation to “come to a good position” given her parents’ sacrifice, but worried that further studies risked jeopardising her father’s health. For Priya, access to mobile agency required “hard choices” (Marginson 2014, p. 16) that implicated her family, not just her-self. She said, “I’m happy but the thing is, inside of me, I’m stressed. I always remember, I have to pay, I have to pay”.

Similarly, NZ-based refugee-background student, Rose, envisaged HE as a pathway to a “stable job” and “steady income”. However, after receiving inappropriate course advice, Rose’s “hard choices” had led to academic failure (Marginson 2014, p. 16). Marginson (2014, p. 13) notes, universities can be “unfamiliar and sometimes-hostile environment[s]” where “learning curves are steep with the top out of reach”. Rose described her sense of obligation to navigate HE both quickly and successfully in order to support her family:

I thought, okay, ... getting ... a degree with a job, good paid is important ... I thought, ... I have to have this steady income for my people ... They think that I will make better decision than them ... But I may not ... The university told me that you have to make some ... brave decision ... but then I feel like, oh my god, if I do that, I’ll spend time and then my family, they will not get the help in time ... Very pressured. I feel very pressured.

Marginson (2014, p. 13) acknowledges that, as self-forming agents, international students study under conditions where “potentials and outcomes are unequally distributed”, noting that the potentials of mobile agency “should not be romanticised” (p. 13). Priya and Rose’s accounts revealed the costs of uneven distribution in internationalised HE, and the ‘weight’ of agency as self- and other-formation.

Marginson (2014, p. 15) describes “the sojourning student [as] more than one person living more than one life”. He suggests that the pluralities inherent in international study lead to “a heightened sense of cultural relativism ... greater reflexivity, [and] a more conscious and deliberative approach to personal choices and identity formation” (p. 15). Such reflexivity was evident in our study where women reflected on the regulatory role of family or community members. An example was Mary, a Bangladesh-based international student. Mary described her parents’ prominence within her ‘home’ community, and associated expectations of her behaviour:

My parents are very popular and there are certain ideas around them in society, so ... reputation that needs to be maintained, puts some kind of limitation on me ... I have to walk in a perfect way ... the society limits me a lot ... I know they are doing it out of love, but this love is so closed... It’s not about career, but behaviour.

Mary said she had acquired “critical thinking and logic” through studying at an “international university”, leading to a “shift from where my parents are coming from”. However, Mary also recognised her learning as contextually situated, and therefore, as demanding care when translated elsewhere:

Here [at University A] we are taught many things, but no-one teaches how to implement this into the community at home, which is very closed... We can still make changes, but it’s about how we approach the change ... Here it feels like shouting... so we can’t approach change in that way.

Mary valued the learning acquired through international study, but she refused to valorise so-called Western knowledge or associate criticality solely with Western thought or (loud) resistance (Singh and Han 2016; Doherty and Singh 2005). Mary's refusal to conflate Western knowledge with learning or prestige was also evident in her response to the question, "Where do you want to go next?". She replied:

I don't look on the basis of country ... I know the resources for me are in India ... Prestige, I don't believe in that, maybe Oxford and Harvard got the fame with years of experience, they weren't always like that, I don't look for prestige.

As a reflexively aware mobile, social and political agent (Robertson 2010), Mary represented knowledge transfer as requiring care-full practices of translation, and "prestige" as contextually determined.

Discussion

In this paper we have considered the complex ways in which mobile agency appeared in the narrative accounts of international and refugee-background women engaged in international study in NZ and Bangladesh. The women were diverse in terms of their socio-economic and citizenship status, study contexts, and courses of study. However, with one exception, women's family and/or community relationships loomed large as shaping their educational journeys and imagined futures — as a source of sustenance and support, inspiration and motivation, and/or obligation and regulation. Only one woman spoke primarily as an 'autonomous chooser'. Notably, she was a dual citizen of two powerful regions (the USA and EU), and the daughter of transnational university-educated parents.

Our paper offers an empirical contribution to the growing literature on mobile students' agency in relation to international study (Tran 2013; Marginson 2014; Madge et al. 2009, 2015; Raghuram et al. 2009). It illustrates the complex work of "making a self" for mobile students in HE (Marginson 2014, p. 7), as well as mobile students' differential positioning in relation to both mobility and self-making (Robertson 2010). Specifically, the paper foregrounds women's voices as embodied agents who (to varying degrees) made sense of their HE journeys in relation to wider relational entanglements, both within and beyond the HE context. Women's mobile agency was shaped by other factors such as gendered expectations of acceptable behaviour for women, access to financial resources, and citizenship status. For some women (and women's families), 'self-making' through international study was extremely costly, involving sacrifice, uncertainty, stress, pressure, and/or impossible choices (for example, in Priya's case, between education and her father's health).

The women's narratives in our study exemplify how "international study should not simply be thought of as a movement occurring at a discrete point in time, but rather as an ongoing process inherent to ever-changing mobile lives" (Madge et al. 2015, p. 685). Women's

accounts of their university education sat within broader narratives of familial (and inter-generational) movement, and sometimes, displacement, and their accounts incorporated past circumstances as well as future aspirations. However, women's narratives also exemplified the unevenness of the "global terrain" in which international study takes place (p. 691) — not just in terms of whose knowledge is valued and by whom, but also in terms of women's differential access to mobile agency, the extent to which this was mediated by others, and the confidence with which women could name their hoped-for post-study futures.

Madge et al. (2015) argue for the need to recognise how students as mobile agents shape international study, and in so doing, destabilise simplistic (Western-centric) understandings of 'the international'. While women's narratives revealed differential access to the 'choice' of where to live, study and work, they nevertheless demonstrated the diverse ways in which women actively accessed and navigated international study, and imagined their post-study futures. Agency-as-coping (Marginson 2014) was evident in women's determined risk-taking in order to access (and survive) international study — some women navigated physical risks, as well as the risk of estrangement from families and communities; some navigated emotional challenges and the pressure to perform on behalf of others. Agency was evident in the women's sense of responsibility for their families, and in some cases, communities. Mary's account was notable for its critique of Western-centric notions of what counts as knowledge. She utilised the valued skills of "critical thinking and logic" to reject the simplistic conflation of Westernness and prestige in HE. Instead, Mary highlighted the historical contingency of prestige and represented her own context (India) as a rich site for learning. Both Atafah and Mary imagined themselves as future agents-of-change in their home communities, while noting how the application of their learning would also require the care-full work of knowledge translation.

The narratives in our paper illustrate how international study involves "multi-scalar circularity and mobility from historically contingent multiple locations" and "place-based immobilities ... [that] can produce exclusions and marginalizations which have consequences on the ground for people in different places at different times" (Madge et al. 2015, p. 695). As Madge et al. argue, HE is not a "self-existing unit" in which teaching and learning takes place, but "constituted through the flux of mobile bodies" (p. 694). Madge et al. acknowledge those bodies as including students and educators. We would add students' families and communities. Our study suggests a need to consider international study, and the agency of students who engage in it, in relation to the formation of a 'self' *and* in relation to the formation of families and communities in which 'selves' are situated (Marginson 2014). In our study, only Kirsten spoke as an autonomous mobile agent, but even her account revealed attachments that grounded her 'in place'. All of the remaining women revealed a form of

mobile agency that was integrally connected with broader webs of human relationships, and home and community attachments.

As stated, our study was informed by a feminist commitment to foregrounding women's lives while recognising the pluralities inherent in the category 'women' (Mohanty 2003; Pillow 2007). While we do not wish to promote simplistic tropes about mobile women students, or women more broadly, we note that in Rana, Somaya and Halima's narratives, male family members featured as key education brokers (also see Anderson et al. 2020). Even Kirsten, who positioned herself explicitly as an autonomous scholar, alluded to her father's approval as facilitating her 'choice' of study destination. Atafah referred to gendered expectations in relation to her anticipated return 'home'. Atafah expected opposition, but positioned herself as an agent-of-change who could foster girls' access to rich learning opportunities that were not currently available. Our study suggests the need to recognise that gender shapes some women students' international study journeys in complex and profound ways alongside an array of other factors.

What are the implications for teachers and policy-makers of the entangled complexities that shape international study? We suggest that, just as attention to international study as a multi-scalar, contingent undertaking has the potential to inform our capacity to "*make the international differently*" (Madge et al. 2015, p. 694, emphasis original), so attention to students' broader webs of commitment, constraint, aspiration and human need might lead us to begin to *make HE differently*. Our study joins earlier literature in contesting assumptions of students' autonomy in (internationalised) HE (Anderson 2012; Bullen and Kenway 2003; Johnson et al. 2000). Recognition of entanglements shaping international study calls for policies, practices and pedagogies that are humble and careful — informed by recognition of the differential costs of international study for students and their families, the necessary agency of those who access it (Anderson 2014), and its potential for forming and transforming not only students' lives, but also the lives and life chances of students' families and communities. In practical terms, HE institutions should work to mitigate factors that limit students' agency (Marginson 2014), or the weight of responsibility students carry in accessing HE (Anderson et al., 2020). This might be through offering targeted scholarship funding for students who are in socially or financially precarious positions; ongoing social support to address the disequilibrium (and for some, pressures) inherent in international study (Marginson 2014); recognition of mobile students as epistemological as well as mobile agents — who bring and translate knowledge across study and living contexts (Osborne et al. 2020); opportunities for returning students to reflect on their imagined futures, including the disequilibrium of return (Anderson et al. 2018) and potential challenges of navigating gendered realities; and the promotion of pathways to citizenship for displaced or stateless students through HE. Marginson (2014) suggests that HE teaching should build "conscious

agency” amongst mobile students, and “work with it, rather than suborning or coercing it” (p. 19). We would suggest that HE institutions also need to develop conscious agency amongst themselves, marked by deep recognition of their responsibilities towards the students they recruit and enrol, of students’ diverse circumstances, and of HE outcomes as impacting families and communities’ futures, not just students’ (Madge et al. 2009).

While we do not wish to downplay the devastating and uneven effects of COVID-19, we see this rupture in the practice of HE business-as-usual as a critical opportunity to re-think HE, for example, by extending access within and beyond national borders, re-imagining international study beyond revenue generation, and re-positioning HE as a means to promote ethically and socially responsible futures in an inter-connected world (Robertson 2010).

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