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**International Student Mobility between
the South and the North**

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The phenomenon of international student mobility (ISM) has received little scholarly attention even though it is now a major issue for a) receiving states (as a potential source of skilled labor), b) sending states (as a potential source of brain drain and/or successful returns), c) universities (as a potential booster of international rankings), and d) students deciding where to study, live, and work. This project focuses on Switzerland, a top destination for international students.

Messages for Decision-Makers

- **International students are key players in international migration: they produce knowledge that is beneficial to Switzerland's international reputation of excellence in research, and represent highly skilled labor resources.**
- **There is great potential to develop and implement measures supporting students' social and economic integration, and foster their contributions to international development and Switzerland's global presence.**

A Neglected Topic

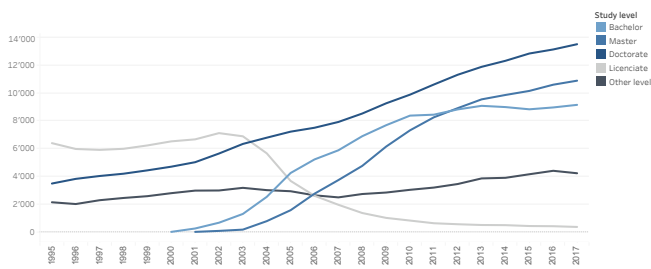
ISM was key to the development of the university system during the Middle Ages and continues to be an important phenomenon today, yet scholars and policymakers do not pay sufficient attention to it. ISM is often seen as devoid of the crucial stakes associated with economic or asylum migration, which possibly explains why ISM remains a neglected research topic. This project aims to address this gap by answering the following questions: Which international students come to Switzerland? How are they represented in political discourse? Do they stay in

Switzerland after graduation? What are the policies of the Swiss government towards them?

Rising Numbers of International Students

According to OECD data, nearly five million students studied abroad in 2015 – the figures have more than doubled since 2000. In recent years, global ISM has grown by about 8% annually, much faster than total international migration. Analyses of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office and OECD data show that in 2015, 17% of students enrolled at tertiary educational institutions in Switzerland had completed their secondary studies abroad. This makes Switzerland a top destination for international students, comparable to New Zealand (21%) and Great Britain (18%). ISM in Switzerland is even more prominent if disaggregated by level of study: In 2015, it ranked second worldwide for doctoral students (54% international students), fourth for master's students (28%), and fifth for undergraduate students (10%). From 1990 to 2016, the population of international students rose from 9,200 to 33,000, thus making the Swiss case relevant to understand ISM.

Evolving Numbers of International Students Enrolled at Swiss Universities 1995–2014



Source: Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2018

Most Students Are from Europe but the Numbers from Asia Are Rising

In 2012, the majority of international students in Switzerland came from Germany, France, and Italy. The proportions of master's degree graduates from non-EU countries were: Asia 13%, Americas 10%, European countries outside the EU/EFTA 7%, Africa 4%, Oceania <0.5%. Most graduates from non-EU countries came from China, United States, Russia, India, and Turkey. Women make up the majority in flows from Brazil, Colombia, Russia, Spain, South Africa, and United States, whereas men predominate in flows from Germany, Austria, India, Iran, and Morocco. International students are thus not a homogeneous group; important differences exist in terms of nationality and gender.

Lagging numbers of African students

Swiss universities and federal scholarship schemes once targeted African students through development cooperation programs. However, for reasons that need to be clarified, ISM to Switzerland from African nations has lagged in recent years in comparison to other nationalities. It appears that African students encounter more difficulties gaining access to Swiss universities than students from the EU and Asia. Equal opportunities should be an important goal.

Contrasting representations and shifting policies

In the Swiss political discourse, international students have been historically represented as either great assets – contributing to innovation and economic growth – or cultural, political, and economic threats – competing with the local labor force in access to the labor market and imposing potential financial burdens on the cantons.

Since the 1990s, Swiss migration policies have placed increasing restrictions on the admission and stay of non-EU immigrants. However, in 2011, the Swiss Parliament approved a law facilitating the admission and residence of non-EU citizens studying at Swiss tertiary institutions. Non-EU students can now provisionally stay in Switzerland for six months after graduation to seek employment

matching their qualifications. This fascinating case of policy openness can be explained by a combination of factors: parliamentarian Jacques Neyrinck's framing of international students as economic assets, support from most political parties, and support from lobbyists. By contrast, progressive policies regarding asylum seekers and low-skilled immigrants remain unaddressed.

Do students stay after graduating?

Due to the original longitudinal database set up by this project, it is now possible to calculate "stay rates" of international students after graduation. These rates indicate the proportion of students staying in Switzerland, or respectively leaving, after graduating. The result – close to 50:50 – shows that these students are not simply temporary residents, but have longer-term migration potential.

What motivates students to come to Switzerland?

A survey of international students at the University of Bern shows that ISM into Switzerland appears strongly linked to broader aspirations of experiencing a new culture. In this context, the quality of life in Bern is particularly appreciated. This finding is contrary to the human capital perspective, which sees international students as simply trying to improve their future career prospects through obtaining a prestigious diploma.

Remaining open questions

This project sheds new light on the neglected topic of ISM. Some fields of study need further investigation, including Switzerland's scholarship policies, the experiences of international students in regards to local integration and international interconnectedness, and the extent to which their new skills can be used after leaving Switzerland.

Key Publications

- Gillibert, Matthieu, and Yvonne Riaño. "Représenter les étudiantes extra-européennes dans le discours politique suisse (1900–2015): Garantie de compétitivité internationale ou concurrence à refréner?" *Géo-Regards* 10 (2017): 11–29.
- Lombard, Annique. "Diplôme en poche—partir ou rester dans le pays hôte? Une analyse des trajectoires des étudiants internationaux en Suisse." *Géo-Regards* 10 (2017): 31–54.
- Renggli, Christina, and Yvonne Riaño. "Mobilité étudiante internationale: Raisons d'étudier en suisse, stratégies, expériences et projets d'avenir." *Géo-Regards* 10 (2017): 71–91.
- Riaño, Yvonne, Annique Lombard, and Etienne Piguet. "How to Explain Migration Policy Openness in Times of Closure? The Case of International Students in Switzerland." *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 2018 (online version).
- Riaño, Yvonne, and Etienne Piguet. "International Student Migration." Oxford Bibliographies in *Geography*, 2016, 1–24.