**International students with dependent children:**

**the reproduction of gender norms**

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**Abstract**

Extant research on family migration for education has focused almost exclusively on the education of *children*. We thus know very little about family migration when it is driven by the educational projects of parents. To begin to redress this gap, this paper explores the experiences of families who have moved to the UK primarily to enable the mother or father to pursue a degree. It argues that, in common with what we know of UK student-parents, both choices about and experiences of higher education are strongly differentiated by gender.

Keywords: higher education, family, gender, international education, status, migration

**Introduction**

In her analysis of contemporary forms of citizenship education, Mitchell (2003) argues that we have seen a shift from an emphasis on the ‘multicultural’ citizen – someone who is able to work in and through difference, and conditioned to believe in the positive advantages of diversity in unifying the nation – to the ‘strategic cosmopolitan’. This type of citizen, she contends, is motivated ‘not by ideals of national unity in diversity, but by understandings of global competitiveness, and the necessity to strategically adapt as an individual to rapidly shifting personal and national contexts’ (p.328). This emphasis on the increasing importance of the individual is also evident in analyses of international student mobility. Indeed, Brown and Tannock (2009) have suggested that such mobility is primarily an individual concern as students seek to gain competitive advantage over others and increase their own attractiveness to employers engaged in a ‘War for Talent’. Similarly, Rizvi (2009) has argued that the growth in the global trade in higher education is closely linked to the increase in opportunities for individuals within a transnational labour market. However, while individual competitiveness may be an important driver of international student mobility, the ways in which this is achieved, and the resources to which individuals have access to facilitate such mobility, are strongly patterned by the social networks within which individuals are located (Brooks and Waters, 2010). The family, in particular, has been shown to play a critical role in such processes of ‘educational migration’.

The growing body of work on family migration, in general, has highlighted important linkages between social and economic motivations for mobility, and the ways in which the dynamics of familial relationships can help to explain migratory behaviour (Kofman, 2004). Within this broad body of work, an increasing number of studies have focussed on family migration for education, specifically – partially in an attempt to explain the dramatic increase in the number of international students worldwide (Huang and Yeoh, 2011). This research has typically argued that educational migration is often pursued in order to enhance the overall status of the family – through helping children to attain high status educational credentials. Children are thus seen to play an important role within familial projects of capital accumulation (Yeoh et al., 2005). Such arguments have been made most commonly in studies that have explored educational migration from Asia to the Anglophone West. For example, Waters (2006) has argued that international education has been pursued by the Hong Kong Chinese middle classes because of the opportunities it offers for their children to develop ‘cosmopolitan competencies’, which are highly valued when they return home, and thus help to reproduce the social status of the family. It also provides middle class families with an alternative route to success, should their children be at risk of ‘failing’ within the highly competitive local education system (Waters, 2007). In many cases, these strategies, pursued by Asian families, involve some degree of familial separation. For example, some scholars have used the term ‘astronaut families’ to describe migratory patterns in which the family relocates to the destination country to secure a high quality international education for the children but, subsequently, one parent – usually the father – returns to the home country to continue with the breadwinning (Huang and Yeoh, 2011; Kobayashi and Preston, 2007). This has much in common with the Korean ‘kirŏgi’ families described by Finch and Kim (2012). In such families, the mother and children move to an English-speaking country for the children’s education, while the father remains in Korea to work and support the family financially. Finch and Kim (2012) note that the families who move overseas in this way include those with very high-achieving children, who aim to secure access to the most prestigious universities in the world, but also those with less highly-attaining children, who seek to gain better credentials than they would have done in Korea. Indeed, they argue that ‘kirŏgi’ practices are now so widespread that they constitute an important part of the Korean culture: a quarter of Koreans say that they would like to migrate for their children’s education, primarily to help them gain cosmopolitan experience (ibid.). Research has also highlighted more extreme cases, in which both parents return to the home country, after settling their children abroad. Ong (1999) describes such children as ‘parachute kids’ ‘who can be dropped off in another country by parents on the trans-Pacific business commute’ (p.19). As Kobayashi and Preston (2007) note, such strategies are somewhat paradoxical, given that the espoused aim of such educational migration is often to maintain family unity and advance the welfare of the children.

While the literature on educational migration has tended to focus on the familial aim of accumulating social, cultural and symbolic capital through educational qualifications and the experience of studying overseas, which will enhance the status of the family on return home, education can also provide a means of gaining permanent residency overseas, and may be pursued for this reason. Ho and Bedford’s (2008) analysis of migration from Asia to New Zealand since the 1990s indicates that while ‘astronaut’ families had been common in the early part of this period, changes to migration policy (that facilitated transition from student to resident) had encouraged families to use education as a means of securing residency. Ho and Bedford note that, as a result of these changes, new ‘projects’ of transnational education have emerged, with many families sending their children to New Zealand as international students with the intention of subsequently applying for residence, and then bringing other family members to join them. Similarly, Ong (1999) has argued that, for some of those migrating from Hong Kong to Canada, children’s education has been used as a means of securing entry to Western democracy; once their education is complete, the children are expected to help their parents develop their business activities.

It is notable, however, that this sizable literature on educational migration focuses almost exclusively on familial mobility to support a *child’s* education. Despite indications that about one in 20 international students who come to the UK to study bring their children with them (UKCOSA, 2004), family migration to support the education of a *parent* has received virtually no attention. Similarly, while there is an increasingly large literature on the academic and social experiences of international students in many parts of the world, those with partners and/or children are largely absent from these studies. Anderson (2012) has noted that the accompanying partners of international students are ‘absent from higher education statistics and all but absent from academic scholarship’ (p.4). The same can also be said of the children who may accompany an international student or remain in the home country while their mother or father is studying abroad.

The remainder of this article starts to redress this gap in the academic literature by exploring the experiences of students who moved across national borders for an undergraduate or postgraduate degree, but who were also parents – and had taken their children with them. As well as extending our understanding of educational migration, by focussing on the education of parents rather than children, it also contributes to the body of work on ‘student-parents’ (i.e. higher education students who have parental responsibility for a dependent child). The extant literature in this area has emphasised the considerable geographical constraints that often impinge upon the institutional choices of student-mothers, in particular, as they attempt to juggle study with childcare and, frequently, paid employment (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). It has not, however, explored the experiences of *international* student-parents, who often move very considerable distances with their children, and may face very different challenges from student-parents pursuing a degree course in their home country.

**Research methods**

The article draws on a subset of data that were collected as part of a cross-national project on the experiences of student-parents in two European countries (see Brooks 2012 and 2013). For the UK part of the data collection, two universities were chosen to represent some of the variation within the sector: one ‘older’, more prestigious university (hereafter referred to as ‘UK Older’), and a ‘newer’ institution, which was considerably less prestigious (referred to as ‘UK Newer’). In both universities: relevant policy documents (for example, relating to student welfare) were collected and analysed; in-depth interviews were conducted with at least two members of (non-academic staff) responsible for student welfare; and student-parents themselves were interviewed, again using an in-depth approach. Students were recruited through a variety of means, including: placing advertisements at key student locations, at university childcare facilities and on university intranet sites; asking members of staff to forward information about the project to any student-parents they knew; and snowballing from those who volunteered to take part. The interviews with the students were informed by emergent themes from the document analysis and staff interviews, as well as the research questions that underpinned the project. Almost all the interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed in full and then uploaded into NVivo for analysis.

Overall, 39 student-parents from the UK took part in the project. The project aimed to recruit a similar number of students from UK Older and UK Newer and to include, where possible, both undergraduates and postgraduates, and males and females. Achieving diversity in the sample was not, however, always possible. For example, there were very few undergraduate student-parents at UK Older, and relatively few male student-parents at UK Newer, which had an important bearing on the achieved sample, as is shown in Table 1. International student parents were not targeted, specifically, in either institution but were included in the sample to reflect the diversity of the student-parent population – particularly at UK Older. The achieved sample from the UK included a significant number of international students (15 of the 39), of whom the vast majority were studying at UK Older. Although the project’s research questions did not focus specifically on the experiences of international students in comparison to their domestic counterparts, the inductive analysis of the interview transcripts revealed some interesting patterns in relation to the student-parents who had moved to the UK specifically to study for their degree. The remainder of the article draws on the data from the 15 international students who were studying at either UK Older or UK Newer. As Table 2 indicates, all but two of the 15 were studying at UK Older. Furthermore, although there is considerable variation in the subjects that these students were studying, all were postgraduates, on either master’s or doctoral programmes. In line with the overall UK sample (Table 1), both the international student-parents at UK Newer were female, while over half of those at UK Older were male. The students had come to the UK from a wide variety of countries, as Table 1 demonstrates, and most were supported financially by a scholarship or funding from their employer.

[Insert Tables 1 and 2 near here]

The subsequent sections of this paper draw on this data to argue that, despite the wide range of countries from which the international student-parents came, there were strong similarities in the way in which their experiences were patterned by gender. This is discussed, firstly, in relation to the initial decisions the students had made to study overseas and, secondly, in relation to their day-to-day parenting practices. The article then considers the extent to which educational migration can be considered a transformative process and argues that, again, there are significant differences by gender.

**Decision-making processes**

The extant literature on international student mobility, in general, suggests that university status has an important bearing on the decisions made by prospective students. In some countries, this is formalised, with students in receipt of government scholarships for study abroad being able to choose from only a list of prescribed (and prestigious) institutions (Holloway et al., 2012). In other cases, the influence is informal but often equally strong. For example, many of the British young people interviewed by Brooks and Waters (2009) were considering moving overseas for their degree only if they could secure entry to prestigious US universities such as Harvard, Yale and Princeton.

The salience of institutional status in the decision-making processes of international students is borne out in the data collected for this project. At UK Older, the more prestigious UK university, which typically ranks very highly in both national and international league tables, over half the achieved sample were international students (13 out of 20). In contrast, at UK Newer, which is a much less prestigious institution, occupying a mid-ranking position in most national league tables, only two of the 19 student-parents were also international students. Although neither university collected data about the size or characteristics of its student-parent population, on the basis of their own experience, staff at both institutions believed the achieved sample was broadly representative of the wider student-parent population.

The narratives from the student-parents at UK Older suggest that the status of the institution certainly had had an important bearing upon their decision-making. In many ways, they reflect the discourses of younger students, discussed in the wider literature, which emphasise the importance of attending what is perceived to be a ‘world-class’ university (e.g. King et al., 2011). However, the data indicate that this type of influence did not operate equally across the sample: it appeared to be a more important consideration for the male student-parents than their female peers. For the student-fathers, UK Older’s status was the primary reason why they had applied to this particular institution rather than others in the UK (or indeed in other countries):

It’s the best place for the area that I do, which is international law. (Henry[[1]](#endnote-1))

It’s pretty prestigious, and my father, grandfather and great-grandfather all came here. (Francis)

[UK Older] is just such a great school. (Brad)

While university status has been shown to be important for many international students, respondents’ narratives suggest that it may have particular significance for male student-parents, because of the way in which the status of the university may go some way to mitigating the status-loss associated with giving up a job and becoming a student again. Osborne et al. (2004) argue that many men are deterred from returning to study once they have entered employment by dominant social norms that construct their role as a breadwinner. Indeed, gender theorists point to a ‘hierarchy of masculinities’ in which paid work assumes a central and highly valued position (Miller, 2011). Philip touches on this theme in his narrative, when he explains his decision to apply to UK Older: ‘UK Older is a very reputable university, *so it was worth leaving a lot of other things’* (emphasis added). Here, he suggests that it was the status of the university that went some way towards compensating for giving up his job and other aspects of his life in Zimbabwe.

While several of the male students explained their decision-making in this way, implying that the high institutional status helped to mitigate the status-loss associated with giving up one’s job, similar themes were notably absent from the narratives of the female respondents. Typically, institutional status had had some bearing on their decisions about where to study but, in the majority of cases, these had been mediated by a range of social factors and, in particular, their relationship with their husband, partner or boyfriend:

It’s a very good place to do a PhD…But also I came to UK Older from France because my boyfriend was here, and so I discovered the university, thought it was a very nice place, and he was studying here at the time, and so I decided to try to come to study too. (Lily)

I got my degree in Russia almost ten years ago and then I followed my husband who works in [local area]. I was trying to find a job here but realised that without a UK degree I am not really able to find an academic job. (Maria)

I was living in [town in which UK Older is located] already because when I moved here my husband was already doing his degree. (Kirsty)

As these quotations indicate, social relationships appear to be of equal, if not greater, importance when compared to institutional status for many of the women in the sample. In contrast, none of the men indicated that their decision-making had been motivated by similar concerns. Indeed, the narratives of the student-parents from both UK Older and UK Newer suggest that, on the whole, it was males who had initially instigated a move overseas. While female student-parents such as Lily, Maria and Kirsty presented their own ambitions as broadly in line with those of their partner, other respondents spoke of more disagreement within the family unit. For example, Brad explained how his wife had been very opposed to him enrolling as a student at UK Older, because she thought he would spend less time with the family. He went on to say ‘So I told her that I wouldn’t do it if she absolutely wouldn’t, wouldn’t let me – but she knew how I’d feel!....So she begrudgingly allowed me to do it’. A similar story of men’s priorities coming to take precedence over those of their female partners was told by Esma. She explained how, initially, she had started studying at UK Newer as her husband had also been a student there. However, once he had completed his degree, they had moved a considerable distance away, to where he had found a job. She subsequently faced a two-hour journey into UK Newer and confided that ‘it has been much more difficult because it takes two hours one way, so suddenly I found myself alone, more alone’.

In many ways, these gender patterns articulate with the wider literature on family migration in general and educational migration in particular. For example, Coles and Fechter (2007) argue that, although recent years have witnessed an increase in the extent to which women are involved in skilled migration, this has not necessarily meant a ‘detachment from previous social ties, norms and expectations’ (p.229) – which often have considerably more influence on the decisions taken by female migrants than on those of their male peers. Similarly, with regard to educational migration, scholars have shown how the migratory decisions of women often focus on the interests of other family members. Indeed, in their research on women’s migration from Hong Kong to Canada, Preston et al. (2006) argue that a highly normative view of the family was often a primary driving force:

Women emphasised the attraction of educational opportunities that were more accessible, less stressful, of better quality and less expensive than those in Hong Kong. Few women mentioned that they had sought or derived personal benefits for themselves from migrating to Canada. Their narratives of migration decisions stress the benefits of life in Canada for *other* family members. (p.1638) (italics in original)

The emphasis placed upon social relationships by the female student-parents, but not their male peers, provides further evidence that transnational migration engages different household members in different ways (Waters, 2010). While previous work on international students has emphasised the role of wider social networks on a decision to move abroad, this has typically focussed on the influence of parents, friends and/or school teachers (Brooks and Waters, 2010). For older students, partners also seem of considerable significance – but primarily for female, rather than male, student-parents. Moreover, the apparent gender differences in the importance attached to institutional status vis-à-vis familial relationships resonates strongly with extant UK literature on student-parents, which has emphasised the significant geographical constraints upon university choice, faced by women, as a result of their caring and/or employment responsibilities (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Reay et al., 2002).

**Parenting practices**

As Table 2 indicates, although the partners of only two of the 15 student-parents had given up their jobs to facilitate a move to the UK, there were significant gender differences in parenting practices across the sample. Of the seven males, all had a partner who took sole responsibility for the childcare. In contrast, of the eight females, all either shared the childcare with their partner, or had sole responsibility for it. Several of the student-fathers claimed that it would not be possible for them to get as much out of their time in the UK as they currently did without the kind of support their partner provided. For example, Paul explained how, as his wife had finished her doctoral study and was now in paid employment, she could take responsibility for dropping off and picking up their child, and thus allow him to focus on his course:

So that means she doesn’t have to work long hours....without her going to work it would be impossible to do what I’m doing [in terms of enabling him to work long enough hours]. So she starts at 8 and can finish at 5 or 6. And my daughter goes to nursery now, so she brings her there, takes her back, while I sometimes have to work at night.

Without exception, female student-parents did not have same luxury. All assumed sole or at least shared responsibility for childcare, alongside their academic work. Laila described how she and her husband had originally planned that he would remain at home, looking after their child, while she pursued her studies. However, it soon became clear that this approach would not work. She explained:

That was a bit difficult for him...by the end of term I could sense that he was thinking of home. So….in the second term, I would take over, in a week, maybe two days I’d stay at home with my son and he would go out. So there was a bit of adjusting, we’re doing that right now.

As a result of this ‘adjustment’ the childcare became shared more equally, even though the mother was a full-time student and the father was not studying or in paid employment.

These patterns have much in common with those identified amongst UK students. Moss (2004) has argued that there are significant differences in the ways in which women’s time for study and men’s time for study is understood. She contends that partners of female students often conceptualise higher education as women’s ‘time for self and not as legitimate work time’ (p.294). Indeed, for some of the women students involved in her research, finding time and space for their university studies was akin to finding time for leisure. Moreover, the UK literature on student-parents, in general, has demonstrated that when women enter higher education, they are often expected (by male partners but also by others in society) to retain main responsibility for caring for their children (Alsop et al., 2008). The research with student-parents at UK Older and UK Newer suggests that such assumptions hold true equally for international students.

**The transformative potential of educational migration?**

In her research on educational migration to Canada, Waters (2010) contends that it is wrong to assume that transnationalism is always something that is enacted strategically, by actors who purposefully try to change their lives and the lives of those around them in specific, predetermined ways. Instead, she argues, migration (including educational migration) can have a profound impact on migrants and their sense of self, in ways that they had previously not anticipated. She also underlines the potentially *emancipatory* nature of educational migration. Indeed, with respect to her research with lone fathers who remained in Canada to look after their children while their wives returned to East Asia to work, she argues that the self-identity of these men changed considerably as, through taking main responsibility for their children, they learnt new skills and came to value different aspects of life.

There was some evidence that the lives of some of the 15 student-parents involved in the current research had also been changed quite profoundly by the experience of moving to the UK for study. However, the nature of such change seemed strongly differentiated by gender. Firstly, many of the male student-parents described how they had been able to see more of their partners and children over the time they had been pursuing their course. Indeed, several respondents explained that they had more time available to spend with their family than previously, when they had been in paid employment. This was most commonly the case for the male student-parents, many of whom had given up highly pressured jobs to pursue a degree at UK Older. Francis, for example, acknowledged that he was ‘spending way more time with the family than I would be doing if I was back home working’. Indeed, he explained that this was one reason why his wife had been supportive of the decision to come to the UK: ‘she felt that if I did a master’s and we were over here, I’d spend more time with the baby than if I was at work.’ Similarly, Alan claimed that the period at UK Older was ‘probably one of the most stable times in our marriage...in the Air Force I was flying all over the place’. For Henry, his time studying the time UK represented an almost holiday-like escape from the pressures of everyday life:

It’s been great. My wife is here, we have two kids, we like to bomb around as a family, so we do that. We went canoeing…yesterday and we go to movies and we do little outings together, we travel together. And also we’ve, they’re at school full-time now, so we’ve had an opportunity to do things in the afternoons a bit while they’re in school.

Henry went on to claim that he and his wife were seeing much more of each other than previously when he was working, and that the arrangement was having a positive impact on his children as well: ‘I’m sure I’m more relaxed than I had been at work…so I didn’t see them as much and I was probably more anxious when I did see them, and I’m sure they could pick up on that.’ In contrast, very few of the female student-parents claimed that they themselves had been able to spend more time with their children and/or partner as a result of coming to the UK, although some did comment on a change in their male partner’s behaviour. For example, Laila noted:

It has made us [husband and self] so much closer because before this, when back in Malaysia, my husband travelled a lot for work, so while I had a lot of support from grandparents, both sides, he was not around say two weeks in a month, you know, systematically. (Laila)

The second main impact of studying overseas was what some respondents described as a weakening of their support networks and a concomitant increase in the necessity for self-reliance. For some, this was a consequence of the substantial increase in the cost of childcare and domestic help when they moved to the UK. In other cases, it was the lack of informal support that was more significant, particularly where grandparents and/or other members of the extended family had previously looked after the children. Some respondents, such as Laila, experienced significant change in both formal and informal support networks:

Back home in Malaysia our lifestyles were very different. My husband and I were in a city where both my parents and his parents were there and we had domestic help as well, so my little boy you know was always shuttled around....so then coming to [UK Older] has been quite a difference because no-one is around to help us….

For Ishaq, however, the change was not just in terms of childcare, but with respect to a wide range of domestic services:

[In Egypt] you would have a cook, you would have a servant, you would have a driver and so on. So life was much easier…but when we came here it was a totally different experience, so we’re having our own home that we have to manage ourselves and we have to go out to get the groceries, to buy things, to fix things…. (Ishaq)

Again, however, the impact of such changes was not felt equally by male and female student-parents. For example, Maria and Becca both described how the cost of childcare in the UK had had a significant impact on their parenting practices. Maria, when living in Russia, had used a nursery, which had been open for long hours at what she described as ‘a very low cost’. In Pakistan, Becca had employed a nanny to look after her children, again at low cost. After arriving in the UK to study, both had had to take on considerably more childcare within the family than they done previously, as a result of what they perceived to be the prohibitive cost of childcare in the UK. Although a small number of men did discuss the additional childcare ‘work’ (as opposed to just more time to ‘play’ with their children) they had had to take on as a result of the change in support networks, such narratives were much more common amongst their female counterparts.

Moreover, those who had experienced isolation and severe difficulty adjusting to their new lives were all either the female partners of male student-parents or female student-parents themselves. For example, Esma described how: ‘I didn’t feel any support...I don’t have any family members here, I mean in the UK, and my husband doesn’t, so we don’t have anyone.’ The most extreme example of this kind of isolation was reported by Brad, in relation to his wife. Although he and his family were from the US – an Anglophone country which may be seen as more similar to the UK than many of the other countries from which the sample of student-parents had come – he spoke at length about the problems of cultural adaptation. He described how, although the whole family had had to adapt to life in the UK, this adaptation was significantly easier for him than for his wife: day-to-day life as a student in the UK was quite similar to his experiences in the US, and so he had less cultural learning to do than his wife, who was immersed in unfamiliar social situations on a regular basis. Moreover, he believed that while he would receive a ‘reward’ for ‘being away from family and the comforts of the US’ (i.e. his academic qualification), she would not be similarly compensated. Brad went on to describe how, initially, his wife had expressed her frustration by trying to sabotage his course: ‘you know, when I had a test coming up she would make it more difficult for me to study....she really didn’t want me to do it in the beginning….. [We] had really big troubles for the first three months, you know, big fights, big troubles’.

In some cases, problems of isolation were not solely as a result of extended family and/or domestic help no longer being available to help out with childcare and chores around the house. Indeed, both Philip and Ishaq described how their wives, in particular, had at times felt isolated, and how this had been exacerbated by them having given up their jobs in order for the family to move to the UK, and then having to look after a young child once they had arrived:

It’s been really hard for her and I think, the first few months, it was the other thing that I had to deal with because here you have a partner’s who’s feeling under-utilised and she really thinks, you know, this is not on for me, and that was a bit tough, trying to keep her motivated…. We had two jobs, and they weren’t bad things. (Philip)

I assume if we didn’t have my son, my wife could have found a job and then she would be working and I would be studying and it would make it much easier. But now she is staying with him…She’s sacrificing, I mean her…she could have been in Egypt now, working…so she’s doing some sacrifice to support me. (Ishaq)

These data thus suggest that while educational migration can have a profound effect on family practices, this is not always positive and, certainly, on the basis of the experiences of the 15 student-parents involved in this study, there is little evidence to support the claim that it is ‘emancipatory’. Indeed, although a small number of respondents welcomed the opportunity to become more ‘self-reliant’, in general, the burden of additional childcare fell to the women – whether they were student-parents themselves, or the partners of male student-parents. Furthermore, those who had most difficulty adjusting to life in the UK were the partners of male student-parents who had given up their jobs to move with their partners, and thus were not able to benefit from the socially integrative opportunities offered by workplaces and/or educational institutions.

**Discussion**

As is evident from the data discussed in the preceding section, there were some differences between the experiences of the student-parents, which related to their country of origin. For example, those from poorer countries typically found it harder to adjust to the high cost of UK childcare than their counterparts from richer nations. Overall, however, the commonalities across the sample were striking. The lives of the international student-parents were strongly differentiated along gender lines, irrespective of country of origin. The evidence presented above indicates that the male and female student-parents engaged in different decision-making processes when deciding whether to study abroad, with the latter group much more likely to be influenced by other family members. Gender differentiation then continued throughout the time of study, with female student-parents much more likely to take on responsibility for childcare and less likely to experience overseas study as a time of ‘transformation’, and a release from the demands of paid employment. The student-fathers were, without exception, able to devote themselves to their studies, as they had a female partner who took responsibility for all of the childcare. In contrast, the student-mothers took responsibility for at least half of the childcare themselves, alongside their studies. Typically, and unlike their male counterparts, the female partners of male student-parents were not in employment – and were thus more likely to experience social isolation within the UK. These findings strongly support the argument made in the first part of the paper, that, in conceptualising international student mobility, it is important to recognise the way in which such mobility is strongly patterned by the social structures within which individuals and families are located. Such structures impact not only an initial decision whether or not to migrate, but also the way in which time and space for study is negotiated once abroad. Female student-parents, in particular, do not seem to be motivated by the competitive, individualistic concerns that are implicit in Mitchell’s (2003) concept of the ‘strategic cosmopolitan’.

These findings articulate clearly with the extant literature on both educational migration and student-parents. While research on international student mobility has argued that it is often pursued as a strategy to enhance familial status, it has also emphasised the gendered nature of such processes and the normative view of the family that often underpins them (Preston et al., 2006; Waters, 2010). Within this literature, women are often conceptualised as more active agents than has been the case within studies of other types of migration (Raghuram, 2004), driving migration to support a child’s education (Huang and Yeoh, 2011; Huang and Yeoh, 2005). Indeed, Finch and Kim (2012) argue that ‘At the core of the kirŏgi family is an ideology of “familialism”, simply expressed as a mother’s desire to give her child a headstart in a competitive world’ (p.503). Nevertheless, despite this emphasis on maternal agency, it is considerably more likely that the mother, rather than the father, will give up their employment to facilitate such international mobility (Huang and Yeoh, 2011; Waters, 2002) and, as discussed previously, put others’ interests before their own (Preston et al., 2006). Indeed, studies of family migration more generally have argued that such migration is ‘an important social structure which maintains the secondary status of women’ (Cooke, 2008, p.261). Importantly, Cooke (2008) argues that family migration is contingent on the gender role beliefs of husbands and wives: when a family shares egalitarian role beliefs, the family has a lower probability of moving when the wife is employed and a higher probability of moving when the wife is unemployed and wants to work. In couples who do not share egalitarian beliefs, the employment status of the wife has no effect on migration behaviour. This suggests that, although the pressures of being an international student with dependent children may exacerbate gender differentiation, wider societal gender norms and beliefs help to determine who moves across national borders in pursuit of a higher education, and the ways in which this migration is prosecuted.

The gender differentiation discussed above, in relation to the international students involved in this research, also articulates with emerging work on student-parents more specifically, which has begun to tease out the differences between the experiences of student-fathers and those of student-mothers. Within a UK context, scholars have argued that male and female student-parents are often motivated by different concerns, with the latter much more likely to be influenced by a desire to become a good role model for their children (Archer et al., 2003; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). They have also documented the complex ‘juggling acts’ student-mothers, in particular, have to perform to balance study alongside childcare and, often, paid work (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; NUS, 2009; Osborne et al., 2004), and the frequent expectation that women will retain their caring roles alongside their studies (Alsop et al., 2008; Moreau and Kerner, forthcoming). In contrast, more allowance is often made for the demands of studying, if a male partner enrols in a course of study (Brooks, 2012; Baxter and Britton, 2001). The socially-embedded nature of processes of ‘educational choice’ on the part of female student-parents has also been emphasised (Reay et al, 2002). The current study makes an important contribution to this growing body of work, by emphasising that these findings are not limited to ‘home’ students within UK higher education institutions; significant differences by gender are evident also amongst international students.

While this research is important in emphasising the gender-differentiated nature of the experiences of this sample of international student-parents, it is important to recognise that there may be limitations in the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the wider body of international student-parents in the UK. These relate to the relatively small size of the sample, and also its social class composition. On the whole, the majority of the international student-parents involved in this research had come from relatively economically-secure, middle class backgrounds. Although the literature on international student mobility would suggest that this level of affluence is typical of mobile students (e.g. King et al., 2011), the prestige of UK Older may have served to attract those with particularly privileged backgrounds. It is also important to note that, although familial practices are discussed in some detail above, data were collected from only one partner in each family. It is thus possible that the perspectives of the student-parents were not shared by their partners. A small number of studies have explored the experiences of the partners of international students (Anderson, 2012; Kim, 2010), but they remain an under-researched group. Future research should aim to give a voice to this largely neglected population. It is also important that future research pays attention to the perspectives of the children who accompany a student-parent. As Huang and Yeoh (2011) have argued recently, children should not be assumed to be passive actors in the process of educational migration, but as active, social actors, able to navigate their own migrant lives. Although Huang and Yeoh were writing primarily in relation to those who move as part of a family project to further the child’s educational opportunities, the perspectives of children seem equally important when they have migrated as part of a project which focuses on *parental* education. Both social policy and academic scholarship need to move away from conceptualising the internationally-mobile student as a footloose, independent and unattached individual (akin to the ‘strategic cosmopolitan’ of Mitchell’s (2003) analysis) and pay closer attention to the social networks within which such students are embedded.

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Table 1: Characteristics of the respondents at each of the two UK institutions (N)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | UK Newer | UK Older |
| Female | 17 | 10 |
| Male | 2 | 10 |
| Age under 30 | 4 | 6 |
| Age 30-39 | 6 | 9 |
| Age 40 + | 9 | 5 |
| Undergraduate | 7 | 0 |
| Postgraduate | 12 | 20 |
| Home | 17 | 7 |
| Overseas | 2 | 13 |
| Full-time | 14 | 19 |
| Part-time | 5 | 1 |
| Co-habiting/ married | 13 | 20 |
| Single parent | 6 | 0 |
| One child | 8 | 11 |
| Two children | 11 | 5 |
| Three or more children | 0 | 4 |
| With one or more children under 5 | 6 | 16 |
| Total number of respondents | 19 | 20 |

Table 2: Characteristics of the international student-parents

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Student** | **Gender** | **University** | **Course** | **Country of origin** | **Partner status** | **Children** | **Funding** |
| Alan | Male | Older | PhD in Theology | USA | Wife – not in paid employment | Two – aged 6 (twins) | Self-funded |
| Becca | Female | Newer | PhD in Occupational Therapy | Netherlands | Husband – in paid employment (but did not relocate to UK) | Two – aged 5 and 2 | Scholarship |
| Brad | Male | Older | MBA | USA | Wife – not in paid employment | Three – aged 6, 3 and 2 | Funding from employer |
| Claudette | Female | Older | MPhil in Education | France | Husband – also doing a PhD | One – aged 4 weeks | Scholarship |
| Esma | Female | Newer | PhD in Gender Studies | Turkey | Husband – in paid employment | One – aged 3 | Self-funded |
| Francis | Male | Older | MPhil in Land Economy | Australia | Wife - not in paid employment | One – aged 5 months | Employer paying tuition fees; paying for maintenance self |
| Henry | Male | Older | LLM | Canada | Wife – not in paid employment | Two – aged 6 and 5 | Employer |
| Ishfaq | Male | Older | PhD in Public Health | Egypt | Wife – gave up job to come to UK | One – aged 3 | University scholarship |
| Kirsty | Female | Older | PhD in Psychology | Hong Kong | Husband – in paid employment | One – aged 2 | Scholarship |
| Laila | Female | Older | MPhil in Educational Research | Malaysia | Husband – applying for a PhD | One – aged 2 | Scholarship |
| Lily | Female | Older | PhD in French | France and Sweden | Boyfriend – also doing a PhD | One – aged 1 | Scholarship from research council and university |
| Maria | Female | Older | MPhil in Gender Studies | Russian | Husband – in paid employment | Two – aged 7 and 5 | Small bursary; paying for rest self |
| Paul | Male | Older | PhD in Electrical Engineering | Germany | Wife – in paid employment | One – aged 1 | Funding from employer |
| Philip | Male | Older | MPhil in Conversation Leadership | Zimbabwe | Wife – gave up job to come to UK | One – aged 1 | Scholarships (external organisation and university) |
| Sandrine | Female | Older | PhD in Medical Statistics | France | Husband – in employment | One – aged 10 months | Scholarship |

1. Pseudonyms are used throughout. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)