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**The role of international student mobility in inter-
generational social mobility**

Komise pro obhajoby doktorských disertací v oboru sociologie

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Introduction

My research on international migration was initially linked to migration movements immediately preceding or following the integration of countries of Central and Eastern Europe into the European Union in 2004. This research focused on highlighting the frequently obscured economic rationales of migration primarily described as cultural exchange (Bahna, 2005, 2006) or care mobility (Bahna, 2014, 2015, 2016; Bahna, 2020) and includes the first *monograph* on cross-border care mobility in Central Europe published by *Palgrave Macmillan* (Bahna and Sekulová, 2019). This focus on the – new and under-explored – migration source countries of Central and Eastern Europe which, on the one hand, exhibited extreme differences in income levels, but at the same time originated in culturally more familiar environments confirmed the centrality of labor-market-related motives (Bahna, 2013, 2016) and also led to new discoveries. These include a conceptual clarification of the distinction between international and intra-national migration intentions as presented in my article in *International Migration Review*, the leading journal in the area of international migration (Bahna, 2008) and the differing migration strategies within the new economics of labor migration in the case of East–West migration within the EU (Bahna, 2013).

Departing from the focus on economic motivations, my recent work on international migration and mobility of highly qualified migrants in Slovakia, published in *Studies in Higher Education* (Luczaj and Bahna, 2020) and Poland (Luczaj and Bahna, 2022) highlights the ambiguity of international mobility in academia demonstrating that employing international faculty does not necessarily need to be a sign of excellence in research, but might as well be an indicator of qualification shortages.

My latest work on international migration (Bahna, 2018, 2021, 2025; Pilová and Bahna, 2025) focuses on international mobility of students. These works, which form the basis of my thesis, explore the interconnections between international student mobility (ISM) and social mobility. They represent a new angle in the traditionally interdisciplinary field of international migration, which is provided by bringing my analyses closer to one of the core topics of sociology – social stratification and social mobility. The exploration of international student mobility using the uniquely sociological disciplinary lens of social mobility is the major original contribution of my work on international migration. The novelty of this approach is also attested by the fact that my 2018 study in *Population, Space and Place* (Bahna, 2018) ranks among the top 7% of the most cited papers in Web of Science.

The role of international student mobility in inter-generational social mobility is analyzed in the thesis by using data about internationally mobile students from Slovakia and their families collected between 2014 and 2020. These data cover the entire trajectory from the family of origin and its capitals, through the decision to pursue university studies abroad, to the graduate's subsequent career and mobility choices. While the data I base my arguments on refer to research about Slovak students earning their degrees at universities in the Czech Republic and in Western Europe, its aspirations go beyond a single case study. I believe that using the case of mobility from a semi-peripheral, moderately affluent EU country under conditions of unrestricted mobility can help explore the previously unexamined relationship between student mobility and social mobility, yielding insights applicable to many similar contexts.

The starting point of my argument in the thesis is the line of research which sees ISM as a search for distinction from an “ordinary” local university decree. I follow this approach further by placing graduates with a degree from abroad into an inter-generational mobility framework. This opens the intriguing research question of how earning a degree abroad is connected to inter-generational social mobility, more specifically, how beneficial it is to inter-generational social mobility if post-graduation employment is taken up in the country of origin or in a foreign country. And what do answers to these questions mean for the overall impact of ISM on inter-generational reproduction of social status of ISM participants?

In the following text, I present the main findings of the three studies that contribute to this thesis, along with its overall conclusions.

1. Student mobility as a selective process

The first study of the thesis combines insights from approaches focusing on post-graduation non-returns and approaches highlighting the selective nature of ISM. To this end, it connects information on the social background of the students, their study destinations and places where they find work after their studies. The paper recognizes the particular position of study mobility from Slovakia to the Czech Republic which has formally become “international mobility” due to the 1993 split of Czechoslovakia. Here, the Czech Republic, in which students from Slovakia can submit papers written in their native language due to mutual intelligibility of Czech and Slovak – is seen as the more accessible, yet less prestigious study location. Therefore, in the paper, study in the Czech

Republic is contrasted with studies in more distant Western countries where the language of tuition is actually a foreign language for Slovak students.

The first step of the analysis confirms the well-established selectivity of ISM (Salisbury *et al.*, 2009; Salisbury *et al.*, 2010; Wiers-Jenssen, 2012) by observing two mutually reinforcing tendencies a) parents of students who study abroad have a notably higher level of education than parents of students at universities in Slovakia and b) students who study in Western countries have more highly educated parents compared to students who study in the Czech Republic.

In the second step, the study connects the economic and cultural capital of the families of the mobile students with their study destinations and post-graduation (non)returns. The relationships are modeled by a series of regression models and structural equation modeling. The analysis finds a strong link between economic and cultural capital of the parents and the post-graduation (non)returns of the students. These relationships run in opposite directions. While a higher level of economic capital is associated with a higher likelihood of return to Slovakia post-graduation, a higher level of cultural capital is linked to a lower probability of finding employment in Slovakia after studies abroad.

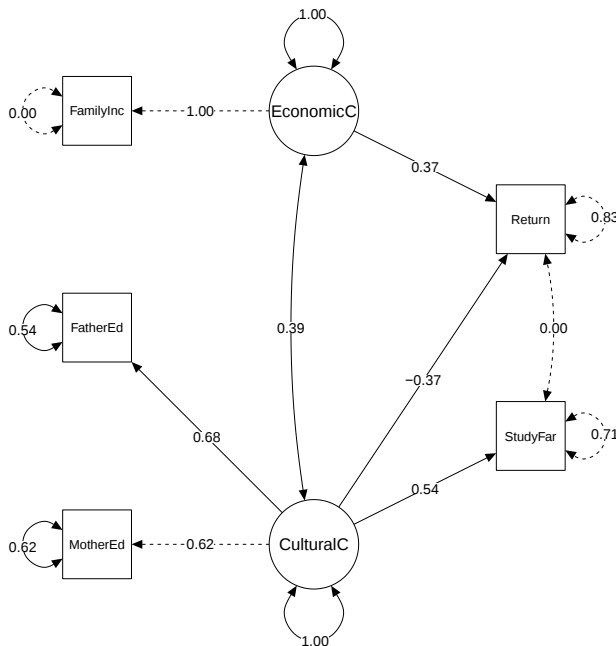
Also, the already mentioned positive relationship between the education of the parents and a more Western study destination is identified. On the other hand, a complete lack of a connection between economic capital of the family and the study destination is observed, suggesting that higher financial costs of studying farther west are potentially offset by the

opportunity to work while studying or by various scholarships awarded to high-performing students.

While the observed tendency of students from more affluent families towards a higher level of post-graduation returns seem to fit the pattern identified by scholars exploring ISM as a tool of distinction (Waters, 2006; Findlay *et al.*, 2006; Waters and Brooks, 2010; King and Raghuram, 2013; Gerhards and Hans, 2013; Schäfer and Walgenbach, 2024), the negative relationship between the education level of the parents and the probability of post-graduation returns contradicts the expected pattern. These findings suggest that considering ISM a tool of cementing privilege of the affluent and well-educated might only be a part of the overall picture. The high share of non-returns among mobile students may have an unintended consequence: – it reduces competition for high prestige jobs in the labor market in Slovakia due to a shortage of privileged candidates. This, in turn, may open new pathways to upward mobility for individuals from less privileged backgrounds.

A second theoretically intriguing topic is highlighted in the concluding discussion of the study – if graduates from the most educated families are more likely to seek employment abroad – what happens with their cultural and social capital? How successful are they in obtaining high-prestige positions when their degree is not from abroad but rather a local degree earned by a foreigner? How do they compete with native graduates in the job market once they cannot, or can only to a limited extent, benefit from their home-bound social capital? While they were the potentially privileged job seekers at the labor market in Slovakia, they might become disadvantaged job seekers abroad. These are the questions which are left open by the first study and are tackled in the second study of my thesis.

FIGURE 1 Cultural and economic capital, study choices and returns of international students, structural equation model



Abbreviations used: MotherEd – education of the mother, FatherEd = education of the father, EconomicC = Economic capital, CulturalC = Cultural capital, Return = Student returned to Slovakia after graduation, StudyFar = students studied in countries other than Czechia and Hungary

Source: Brain drain 2014

Importantly, several of the relationships discovered in the study are confirmed in registry data analyses published several years later. These include the return rate of 39% two or more years after study (Martinák *et al.*, 2025). Also the higher return-rates among the more affluent graduates are confirmed in analyses

based on registry data¹ or, outside of the studied case, on return intentions among international students in Czechia and in the UK (Němeček, 2024).

The path analysis included in the thesis offers an opportunity to compare the patterns observed in the 2014 data reported in the first study published in 2018 with those in the 2020 Brain drain data. It can be seen that all the observed relationships are confirmed in the 2020 data, albeit in a somewhat weaker manner. This overall weakening of the selectivity of ISM between 2014 and 2020 can be most likely attributed to further massification of ISM from Slovakia which took place in the observed period. The notably lower selectivity of destinations farther west could be due to newly emerging study destinations, such as Denmark, which may also be preferred for non-academic reasons, such as generous student stipends.

2. Contrasting a post-ISM career abroad and at home

The second study builds on the results of the first and aligns with research which suggests, that even when ISM graduates originate in affluent Western countries, they do not necessarily overwhelmingly return “home” (Bjørsted, 2010; Wiers-Jenssen, 2012; Zhan, 2022) to enjoy the benefits of their degrees – which, as the ISM-as-distinction perspective highlights, tend to provide them a comparative advantage over domestic degree holders. A large share of the positively selected students ends up competing in an unfamiliar labor market benefiting far less or not at all from their family background with a degree that

1 Martinák *et al.* (2025) report a higher share of returnees from the most affluent capital city region and lower return rates for the less affluent regions in the east of Slovakia.

provides no distinction from local university graduates. Based on the study by Zhan (2022), a considerable proportion of recent international master's degree holders in the UK – including those from the most affluent Western countries – remain in the UK for work, with shares as high as 42% for Finnish students and 44% for Swedish students.

This opens a question which is intriguing both theoretically and empirically: How do ISM graduates who return home and those who find employment outside of their country of birth compare with regard to inter-generational mobility? While migration studies are saturated with studies comparing the labor market outcomes of immigrants with the labor markets of the native population and finding the disadvantages that the former encounter, studies contrasting the educational and occupational reproduction of migrants and non-migrants from the same country are rare (see Guveli *et al.*, 2016; Zuccotti, Ganzeboom, and Guveli, 2017). In one of those rare studies, Zuccotti *et al.* note that while losing ties to their less privileged family background might be an advantage for the careers of migrants with a lower social background, losing these resources can be costly for those from higher-status families (Zuccotti *et al.*, 2017). The latter situation is clearly the one which describes the non-returning ISM graduates. The second study of this thesis is the first instance of a similar comparison for ISM graduates.

This Study uses the inter-generational status attainment model (SAT) by Blau and Duncan (1967) as an inspiration to conceptually describe empirical findings from the Brain drain survey series. Descriptive results presented in the thesis indicate that non-returnees tend to have a lower, though not significantly lower, socio-economic index of their occupation

(ISEI), while simultaneously having parents with higher levels of education compared to returnees.

In a series of regression models and structural equation modeling in the study, I demonstrate the expected connection between the ISEI index of the parents and the ISEI of the graduate. Splitting the sample into returnees and non-returnees demonstrates that the link between the education and socio-economic index of the graduate's father's occupation and that of the graduate is stronger for the ISM returnees (a standardized path coefficient of 0.23) than for non-returnees (0.13). This is not unexpected, given the fact that, compared to ISM returnees, ISM non-returnees had lower ISEI scores and higher levels of parental education and ISEI.

This finding provides an interesting nuance to the line of literature which sees ISM as a vehicle of reproducing class privilege. If, as studies suggest, ISM non-returns are fairly common even among students from Western countries, then for many privileged families ISM might actually serve as a tool for obtaining a job abroad that is less prestigious than their children would likely have secured back home. This adds further context to the already discussed observation from the first study that it is the graduates from the more educated families who return home less frequently. This opens the topic of the connection between prestige hierarchies of occupations (which are known to be relatively stable and internationally comparable, see Hauser and Warren, 1997 or Garcia-Mainar and Montuenga, 2025) and prestige hierarchies of countries (Raghuram, 2013; Prazeres *et al.*, 2017; Brooks and Waters, 2022). It seems that a typical outcome of ISM among families with a high level of cultural capital is a son or a daughter employed in a more prestigious country in a less prestigious

position than would be the case upon their return home. This paradox has so far been mostly unnoticed in ISM literature, perhaps with the exception of Findlay (2011) who comments on the contradiction between ISM non-returns and the theorized class reproduction supposedly taking place via ISM.

If we use the opportunity to replicate the analysis from Study Two using data from the Brain drain 2020, we see a familiar, yet somehow different picture. While, as was the case in 2014, non-returnees typically have parents with higher levels of education and ISEIs, at the same time, both the average educational attainment as well as the ISEI of the parents is notably lower in 2020 than it was in 2014. Both are most likely the outcomes of the already noted overall massification of ISM from Slovakia which occurred between the two surveys from the brain Drain series. Comparing the ISEI of the returnees and non-returnees, we see a difference between Brain drain 2014 and 2020. In 2020, the returnees have a lower average ISEI than non-returnees which is due to the non-returnees working in the Czech Republic where the average ISEI of the non-returnees group is particularly high. Indeed, even the difference in the strength of the link between parental ISEI and the ISEI of the graduate among returnees and non-returnees disappears.

I believe this might be another result of the declining selectivity and massification of ISM from Slovakia. As graduates from Slovakia are becoming more common in the Czech labor market, they are more accepted and are also generally improving in the ability to navigate the local labor market. At the same time, returning ISM graduates in Slovakia might become more common and might lose part of their comparative advantage. Since my main argument in study number two concerned the non-transferability of social capital

of the upper middle class while seeking employment abroad, I reanalyzed the 2020 data for the smaller and more specific group of ISM graduates who have studied in Western countries beyond the neighboring Czech Republic and Hungary, where Slovaks (or ethnic Hungarians from Slovakia) study in their native languages. This is the group of ISM graduates with the highest levels of parental education and ISEI. At the same time, their ISEI is more than two points lower than of the ISM graduates returning home.

This means that although participants of ISM in the Western European countries are the most positively selected mobile students from Slovakia, they find employment with the lowest level of ISEI among all Slovak ISM graduates. For them, the formula observed in the second study still applies – their ISEIs link to the education and occupational status of their father is weaker than in the case of the returnees (and those who work in the Czech Republic or Hungary).

Observations from Study Two and its application to Brain drain 2020 data directly inform some of the distinctions I use in the Third Study of this thesis and vice versa – results from Study Three explain some of the observations in study number two. First, they identify the special case of Czechia (and Hungary), which are the least culturally distant and most likely also the places where leveraging social capital from home is the easiest and most successful. Second, results from the Third Study show that a part of the explanation of high ISEIs of graduates employed in the Czech Republic is due to those graduates who studied further “West” and later found employment in the Czech Republic after their studies. This points to the role of post-graduation mobility in the understanding of the overall story of distinction and intra-generational reproduction of

social status connected to ISM. Post-graduation mobility of internationally mobile students is the topic of the Third Study in my thesis.

3. The mobility after mobility

While ISM research usually distinguishes between “stayers” (ISM graduates who stay in the country of their studies post-graduation) and “returnees” (ISM graduates who return home post-graduation), there is a sizable group of degree mobile students who are neither. Based on the Brain drain data, up to a quarter of ISM graduates find work neither back home in Slovakia nor in the place of their studies. My Third Study asks about the role of further, post-study mobility of international students. The principal question being if this mobility can be linked to career advancement. Other questions include whether there is less post-graduation mobility in the case of “light” ISM mobility in the Czech Republic (or Hungary for ethnic Hungarians), and whether the characteristics of the place of study influence post-graduation mobility patterns. Again, the Study enters empirically uncharted territory. While a few authors have noted the “super mobile” ISM group – students who neither return home nor remain in the host country (Findlay *et al.*, 2017a; Tan and Hugo, 2017; Wu and Wilkes 2017) – their studies are either qualitative in nature or based on stated intentions rather than actual post-graduation mobility.

In the Third Study I distinguish four types of ISM graduates. Besides those who stay in the city of their study (“stayers”) and those who return to Slovakia (“returnees”), I recognize two types of post-graduation mobility – national mobility within the

country of study and international post-graduation mobility. As this is the latest study of the thesis, it already includes an analysis of both Brain drain 2014 and Brain drain 2020 surveys. The two surveys find very similar shares of the four groups of internationally mobile students who found employment after their studies. As expected, the two major groups are the returnees (43% in both surveys) and those who stayed in their city of study (32% to 34%). About 12% to 13% were graduates who were mobile nationally after their graduation and between 10% and 12% of ISM graduates were mobile internationally.

The Study presents the probabilities of the four mobility scenarios using the distinction between mobility of students who study in their native language in the Czech Republic or Hungary and mobility where studies are not in the native language and take place in a Western country. On all occasions, students engaging in mobility in their native language in the Czech Republic or – in the case of ethnic Hungarians from Slovakia – studying in Hungary had a lower probability of post-graduation mobility. For example these graduates had a 13% (in 2014) or 8% (in 2020) probability of international post-graduation mobility when compared to those who studied in a foreign language who had a 19% (in 2014) or 15% (in 2020) probability for international post-graduation mobility.

Establishing the contrast between post-graduation mobility among degree mobile students who studied in a foreign language and those who studied in their native language, I ask if international post-graduation mobility can be explained as a career-oriented move. Do ISM graduates who are internationally mobile after their graduation have more

prestigious and better paid jobs than those who are not mobile further?

With regard to this question, the results are ambiguous. While in 2014, international post-graduation mobility was not connected to a higher ISEI of the graduate's job, international post-graduation mobility seems to be a strategy for improving one's job prospects in 2020. Those internationally mobile after graduation have jobs with an almost 6 point higher ISEI value when compared to graduates who stay in the city of their studies. Interestingly, this only applies to international post-graduation mobility, national post-graduation national mobility was not connected to more prestigious jobs.

The ambivalent results regarding post-graduation mobility and job prestige might be connected to the already noted high employment success of Slovak students at the labor market in the Czech Republic. Indeed students studying in the same language had in 2020 an ISEI score of their employment higher by 5.5 points. This is likely related to the finding that staying in the Czech Republic after graduation does not lead to lower employment prestige as observed in the Brain drain data from 2020 when analyzed in the context of the second study of this thesis. These observations might be connected to a normalization and massification of ISM from Slovakia by making Czechia a very "at-home-like" environment, where Slovaks do not bear the costs of navigating a "truly" foreign labor market. At the same time, the higher ISEI score of the students who are mobile post-graduation might signal an emerging group of Slovak graduates who are strategically looking for prestigious job offers outside of the country of their studies as they no longer perceive their ISM an achievement in itself. This way, international post-graduation mobility may

represent a further step in the quest for distinction in an era of ISM massification (Findlay *et al.*, 2017).

Conclusion: ISM as part of inter-generational mobility

The thesis explores the role of international student mobility in inter-generational social mobility. Despite the well-established selectivity of ISM towards students from the upper-middle class and students from families with university education and identifying “*social stratification in education abroad*” as a key priority in ISM scholarship (Ogden, Streitwieser and Mol, 2021, p. 233), ISM so far has never been explicitly considered within explorations of inter-generational social mobility. The contribution of ISM to social mobility was sometimes considered implicitly but, to the best of my knowledge the possible scenarios combining ISM and post-graduation mobility have never been studied from the inter-generational social mobility perspective.

The established narrative in ISM literature interested in the social composition of ISM participants is as follows: ISM participants are positively self-selected towards coming more often from (upper) middle class families. After completing their studies abroad, ISM participants return home and experience various positive monetary and non-monetary returns from their mobility, related to the distinction their educational credentials from abroad provide them with (e.g. Lörz, Netz, and Quast, 2016; Kratz and Netz, 2018; Waibel *et al.*, 2018). In this manner, the argument continues, ISM contributes to the reproduction of social inequality as a) the privileged are able to send their offspring abroad more easily, and b) the well paid jobs they find after they return home help them in maintaining

their privileged position. At the same time, non-returns are typically not considered in studies exploring the labor market premium of ISM returnees (see Lörz *et al.*, 2016; Kratz and Netz, 2018).

Empirical findings presented in my thesis indicate that the above narrative is only one of the possible scenarios in the more complex landscape of ISM impacts. Taking into account these other scenarios might even reverse the overall effect of ISM on social reproduction. Data from my 2014 and 2020 Brain drain surveys of post-graduation situation of international students from Slovakia suggest that cultural capital (measured via parental education) of a student's family associates positively not only with the choice to study abroad but with post-graduation non-returns as well. In 2014, 48% of the non-returns had both university educated parents compared to a share of 38% among the returnees. Overall, in the studied period only about 15% of university students from Slovakia (including internationally mobile students) had both parents with university-level education.

If international students are typically from highly educated families with a high level of cultural capital and at the same time those students tend to remain in the country of their studies more often, this could be unexpectedly good news for source country graduates with a more working-class background. It would mean, they face less fierce competition not only while entering the university, but also when looking for the local “first class” jobs. This suggests a potential unintended consequence of the hypothesized strategy of the middle classes to distinguish themselves at the local labor market: An opening up of the mobility channels in their country of origin.

On the other hand, for the non-returning upper middle class graduates the “distinguishing identity marker” (Findlay *et al.*, 2012, p.128) of international education may provide no real distinction. If they do not return, they end up competing at the labor market in their place of study with people with a similar type of university education. As the second study of my thesis shows, individuals who remain abroad typically end up in labor market positions that are lower than those of individuals who return to Slovakia or, as indicated by the Brain drain 2020 data, those who secure employment in the more familiar Czech job market. The study also highlights the weakening of the links between the graduate’s job and the parental education and occupation among the non-returning graduates. Among other things, these findings somehow question the purpose of the recurrent calls for support for a wider participation in ISM among students from lower social classes as a means to undermine the reproduction of privilege provided by ISM (see Lörz *et al.*, 2016).

Yet, for the described mechanism to have an impact, the share of upper-middle class non-returnees has to be relevant. In this regard, the Brain drain survey results and register data from Slovakia (Martinák *et al.*, 2025) suggest that this mechanism applies to a rather large share of ISM participants. Based on the 2014 and 2020 surveys, at least two years after study only 39% of Slovak international students are back in Slovakia. This number seems to be broadly in line with older data from Denmark and Finland. Here, research suggests that one in two international students settle abroad after graduation (Bjørsted, 2010; Wiers-Jenssen, 2012). This is interesting, as within the EU Slovakia belongs to the less affluent countries and Denmark and Finland to the more affluent ones. Still, the return rates of international students in those three countries seem to

be of a similar magnitude. These rather similar levels of “brain drain” connected to ISM across Europe discourage from treating ISM within the same conceptual framework as labor migration, explaining the phenomena mostly by income differences between countries. As student mobility is more common among young people from high social background, it is probable that factors related to career-ambitions and self-development dominate economic considerations. This could make the decision-making of graduates from wealthier and poorer EU countries more similar overall, compared to the case of labor migration.

However, more recent results by Zhan (2022) do find higher return rates of international students in the UK for more affluent countries and lower for the less affluent, indicating the presence of economic considerations or considerations for prestige ranking of places (Prazeres *et al.*, 2017; Netz *et al.*, 2024). Nevertheless, non-return rates observed by Zhan (2022), even for graduates from the most affluent countries, are still rather high, suggesting a substantial share of non-returns among ISM participants across a wide range of countries. I believe this is an indication, that the simultaneous selectivity of ISM and of post-ISM returns can be an important mechanism acting against ISM as a tool of social reproduction by vacating privileged positions in a society also in the case of ISM from affluent Western countries – suggesting a mechanism relevant also for student mobility outside of the studied case.

Based on these considerations and on the results from my studies, I identify four alternative post-graduation scenarios of ISM with differing consequences for inter-generational reproduction of social status at the individual level.

The Classic Advantage Scenario (1A)

In this scenario, graduates find employment in their country of origin after completing their studies abroad. This is the situation usually considered in studies of ISM which explore post-graduation employment. Various types of advantages of ISM at the local labor market are confirmed by the research suggesting that earning a degree abroad and finding a job at home might act as a tool of social reproduction and preservation of social status.

The Mobile Classic Advantage Scenario (1M)

This is the post-graduation mobility version of scenario 1A – its existence is suggested by results from the Third Study when ISM participants earn prestigious degrees and find employment in a country where they still can rely on their family capitals and, at the same time, their degree provides a distinction when compared to the degrees of the local graduates. Slovak ISM students earning a degree in the Netherlands and finding employment in the Czech Republic could be an example of this scenario.

The Mobility Without Advantage Scenario (2A)

This scenario is the situation discovered and analyzed in the first two studies of this thesis. Students from privileged backgrounds study abroad and find employment abroad. As they cannot use their education as a tool of distinction and cannot fully rely on social and cultural capital of their families when looking for a job, they find employment below the level they would be able to secure in case of their return home. It is the exact opposite of the *Classic Advantage Scenario* as in this case ISM works against social reproduction and leads to less prestigious employment of ISM participants. Therefore, this

scenario could also be called the “Downward Mobility Paradox”.

The Mobile Mobility Without Advantage Scenario (2M)

This scenario is the post-graduation mobility version of scenario 2A – in this case post-graduation employment takes place in a country with a similarly prestigious education so the distinction of having a degree from abroad does not apply and, at the same time, the country of employment is culturally distant from the country of origin, so the graduate can make no use of his or her family capitals related to the high education and social standing of his or her family. This scenario could refer to Slovak graduates from a Swedish university finding employment in the Danish labor market.

Out of the four described scenarios, scenario 1A has been the subject of systematic study in ISM literature so far (e.g. Lörz, Netz, and Quast, 2016; Kratz and Netz, 2018; Waibel et al., 2018) while scenario 2A has received only limited research attention. The little research available is in line with the expectation of mobile graduates experiencing deskilling when compared to the local graduates mostly due to missing social networks (Pham, Tomlinson and Thompson, 2019; Tran *et al.*, 2023). As we know from the Third Study, scenarios 1M and 2M are relatively rare and describe approximately 10% of students who are internationally mobile post-graduation. So in most situations, it is the balance between the most prevalent scenarios 1A and 2A that determines the overall contribution of ISM to social mobility on the individual and country level.

The overall outcome with regard to inter-generational social mobility on the *individual level* might be that of supporting the inter-generational transmission of the favorable social status of

the family (scenarios 1A, 1M) as well as that of weakening of the links between social position of parents and their children (scenarios 2A and 2M).

The overall impact of ISM on social mobility at the *country level* depends on the overall selectivity of the ISM and on the final ratios of the identified scenarios. The impacts of these mechanisms could be particularly relevant for countries with a high share of its upper-middle class students studying abroad. The macro-level consequences of the four identified scenarios for the overall inter-generational reproduction of social status, can be discussed from the perspective of the sending as well as from the perspective of the country of origin.

From the perspective of the sending country:

If scenario 1A is clearly prevalent, the impact of ISM on inter-generational reproduction in the country of origin will be that of strengthening or maintaining the privileged position of the upper societal strata. This is the expectation from ISM literature at least since 2006 (Waters, 2006; Findlay et al., 2006), identifying ISM as a possible tool for distinction at the local labor market. On the other hand, if scenario 2A is more common, ISM might instead support inter-generational mobility in the sending country. If children from highly educated families find employment abroad, this opens up mobility channels for the locally-educated graduates from families without university educated parents.

The perspective of the destination country of ISM is more ambiguous and would require further research. The following two scenarios can be imagined:

1. Many ambitious upper middle class students arrive in the country, which limits the access to the most prestigious education for the less talented children of the local elites. As many of the foreign students find employment in the host country, they pose further competition for the local elites, which might negatively impact their opportunities for inter-generational reproduction of a favorable position at the labor market.
2. Many ambitious upper middle class students arrive in the country, but this does not limit access to the most prestigious education for the less talented children of the local elites as they are still able to pay for their education and they manage to earn the most prestigious degrees. Even though many of the foreign students find employment in the host country, lacking local social and cultural capital they lose against the offspring of the local elites who are able to rely on their local capitals to secure prestigious job opportunities and maintain favorable positions at the labor market across generations.

These effects might not be of substantial magnitude in most countries, but in major destinations for international students, such as the US or the UK, the exploration of how the local managerial or academic elite is reproduced in the context of a growing or declining presence of international graduates from local universities would constitute an interesting research topic. Are the local elites able to maintain, improve on, or are they losing the ability to access highly prestigious positions in the local labor market in these situations? The limited empirical evidence on the impact of foreign graduate students finding employment in the host country suggests a negative impact for the recent local graduates and a positive one for the

experienced native born workers (Demirci, 2020). Moreover, the analysis of the country-level effects becomes even more complex if we take into account that all countries are simultaneously senders and receivers of international students.

The finding that employment abroad, even when less prestigious than the parents' employment, is still regarded as a success by both parents and likely by the graduates themselves, opens an avenue for theorizing the role of prestige assigned to the place of employment. The position of a research assistant at a major university in the West might be evaluated as more desirable than the position of a professor at the main national university in a central European country. An acclaimed national heart transplant surgeon might consider the position of an assistant surgeon in a major US hospital of his son as more desirable than his own. Many authors, including myself in the Third Study, suggest that a hierarchy of places is important in ISM (Prazeres *et al.*, 2017; Brooks and Waters, 2022), and this hierarchy likely explains the frequent occurrence of scenario 2A. It is the prestige attached to the place of employment rather than the prestige of the position itself which explains why finding employment abroad below the socio-economic status of their parents might be perceived as acceptable or even a sign of upward mobility by the privileged ISM graduates. In this regard Brooks and Waters (2022) find that an international career might in fact actually mean a career in the US or the UK with countries such as Australia or New Zealand seen as "stepping stones" rather than final destinations. My findings suggest that a measure of hierarchical ranking of places may serve as a complement to the observed inter-generational reproduction in terms of occupational positions to provide a full account of how is inter-generational transfer of social

status perceived among mobile students and their families in an international mobility setting.

Findings based on the socio-demographic composition of students in the 2014 and 2020 Brain drain surveys suggest that the increasing massification of student mobility from Slovakia is accompanied by a decline in the selectivity of its participants. How does this trend impact the discussed role of ISM in inter-generational social mobility? The impact seems to be complex and the overall outcome with regard to scenarios 1A and 2 is yet to be established. As the share of students from lower strata increases, their employment in a less prestigious job (even if they find employment abroad) than the job of their parents becomes less likely. In this regard, studying a university abroad or studying at home does not make much difference with regard to students from families with lower levels of cultural capital. On the other hand, massification of ISM does not change the prospects of ISM graduates from upper middle class families who find employment abroad and will be unable to rely on their locality-bound capitals. At the same time, massification of ISM most likely decreases the distinction provided to ISM graduates in scenario 1A in the local labor market regardless of their social background lowering the advantage of international graduates.

Despite their intriguing nature, the preliminary findings of this thesis have limitations. Even though they are based on two independent surveys conducted at two points in time and are partially confirmed by administrative data, my data cover ISM from only one country. To establish a more universal applicability of the hypothesized role of ISM in the inter-generational reproduction of social status, data from larger surveys fielded in more countries would be necessary.

Similarly, while the existence of the Mobility without advantage scenario 2A seems to be well established in the Slovak case, to support the hypothesized positive impact of ISM on vertical mobility in the country of origin, other supporting analyses would be needed, such as a comparative study of inter-generational mobility in Slovakia and in a similar country with lower levels of ISM. Even if such a study would be available, it would require sophisticated analysis to separate the effect of the openness in vertical mobility for the less privileged due to ISM from alternative causes. While some of my conclusions therefore remain speculative, as they would require complex empirical confirmation, the existence and prevalence of the Mobility Without Advantage scenario could be relatively easy to identify also in other national contexts. If confirmed, this alone would provide a relevant counter-thesis to the burgeoning literature exploring the advantage provided by ISM to its graduates.

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A complete list of references is provided in the thesis.

*References to publications by Miloslav Bahna can be found in
the next section.*

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Studies included in the thesis are marked bold.

Summary

This thesis builds on my long-term research focus on the sociology of international migration. It brings the traditionally interdisciplinary topic of international migration closer to the core agenda of sociology by innovatively combining migration research with social stratification research, using the case of international student mobility.

The thesis examines the role of international student mobility (ISM) in intergenerational social mobility. Building on the positive social selectivity of internationally mobile students and their post-graduation labor market benefits, the consensus in ISM research views student mobility as a means of distinction and social reproduction. The thesis draws on two surveys of parents of Slovak ISM graduates, conducted in 2014 and 2020, covering students who graduated in 2012 and 2018 or earlier. These surveys provide a unique dataset combining information on family background, place of study, post-graduation employment, and country of residence. The analysis confirms the expected positive social selectivity into ISM. However, it also reveals a positive link between parents' high cultural capital and their children's post-graduation employment abroad: many ISM graduates with highly educated parents secure employment abroad, often in less prestigious positions than those who return to Slovakia. This suggests a weakening of the link between graduates' occupational prestige and that of their parents. In the more recent data, post-graduation mobility emerges as a possible means of distinction from "regular" ISM graduates during the massification of student mobility from Slovakia. Graduates who are mobile after graduation tend to secure more prestigious jobs than those who remain employed in their country of study.

The thesis identifies two prevailing scenarios in the relationship between ISM and inter-generational social mobility. When ISM graduates find employment in their country of origin, ISM supports social reproduction and upward social mobility. Conversely, when ISM graduates obtain employment abroad, ISM constrains social reproduction in families with high cultural capital. Although the literature generally assumes a solely positive impact of ISM on the inter-generational transfer of social status, its actual impact depends on the balance between these two scenarios.

The thesis also discusses macro-level effects. For the sending country, based on the selectivity of ISM and on the balance of the two scenarios, ISM might be both a tool of social closure when returns prevail or a tool of social opening when ISM graduates stay abroad and decrease competition for privileged jobs in the source country. The impacts on the destination country could also be twofold – competition in the form of international students might make prestigious university education less accessible for the less talented members of the local elites. Or, the local elites might still be able to maintain their positions vis-à-vis international graduates lacking local social capital. While the overall impact of ISM on social stratification in a country might be hard to evaluate, the presented findings and the well-documented tendency of ISM to find employment in their country of study, suggest that the impact of ISM on inter-generational social mobility, both at the individual and macro levels, is more nuanced than previously assumed.