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

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Abstract
Internationalisation and forced migration are rarely thought about as related phenomena in higher education (HE) literature. Internationalisation is associated with movement, choice and brand recognition, and used in international rankings methodologies as a proxy for quality. Forced migration is associated not only with movement, but also with lack of choice, containment, or 'stuckness'. Some scholars have called for a rethinking of 'the international' through attention to students as mobile agents, and international study as situated within broader mobile lives. Our study responded to these calls through exploring the educational biographies of 37 international and refugee-background women students based in two universities: 21 in New Zealand and 16 in Bangladesh. Ten of the women were from refugee or refugee-like backgrounds, while the remainder were international students. The women's accounts revealed the complex ways in which circumstances shaped their educational journeys similarly and differently. One woman represented mobility in relation to autonomy and choice; but most emphasised relational webs as shaping their access to and experiences of international study, and post-study aspirations. In this paper, we draw on selected narratives to illustrate the range of ways in which family and/or community members appeared in women's accounts of their education journeys: as a source of (1) sustenance and support; (2) inspiration and motivation; and (3) obligation, and sometimes regulation. We conclude by suggesting that attention to the affective and embodied entanglements that shape students' international study journeys might inform new ways of thinking about both 'the international' and higher education more broadly.

Keywords Internationalisation · Forced migration · Refugee · Higher education · New Zealand · Bangladesh · Relationality

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Introduction

Internationalisation and forced migration have generally been considered separately in higher education (HE) literature (exceptions include King and Raghuram, 2013; Wu and Wilkes, 2017). Internationalisation is associated with movement, choice and brand recognition, and used in international rankings methodologies as a proxy for quality (Knight, 2014). Forced migration, while also associated with movement, connotes a level of 'stuckness', or lack of choice in relation to when, how and to where one moves (Jefferson et al., 2019). The past two decades have been marked by contradictory human mobilities — unprecedented levels of human movement of many kinds, and the hardening of national borders in many contexts (Hammerstad, 2014; Pickering, 2004; Lambrechts, 2020). Many countries have competed to attract mobile students as 'human capital' and revenue (Knight, 2014; for example, see New Zealand Government, 2017). However, forcibly displaced students remain precariously positioned in relation to HE (Lambrechts, 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 3% of eligible refugees globally gained access to HE (https://www.unhcr.org/tertiary-education.html) , compared with an overall youth access rate of around 38% (UNESCO, 2018).

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

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

It is necessary to explain our use of the terms 'refugee-background' and 'international student' in this paper. The UN 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as 'someone who

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

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

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

International and refugee-background students alike move across geographical borders in order to live and/or study (King and Raghuram, 2013). However, as King and Raghuram note, academic literature rarely considers the complex ways in which mobile students are positioned differently in HE. Specific tropes are associated with international versus refugee-background students, or refugee-background peoples. For example, international students are positioned in relation to a Western supremacist imaginary in which 'the West is understood to be at the top of a global hierarchy of humanity with the rest of the world trailing behind' (Stein and Andreotti, 2016, p. 226). Within this way of imagining internationalised HE, 'Western higher education' is 'a desirable product' (p. 226), and international students are a source of 'cash' and human capital (p. 231; also see Anderson, 2014). International students are also positioned as 'competition' (to local students), and as objects of 'charity', for example, as aid recipients (p. 234). In NZ, international students are positioned in contradictory ways — as a (desirable) source of revenue; a resource to promote 'local' students' engagement with 'difference'; and as (deficient) 'outsiders' (Anderson, 2013, 2014). On the other hand, refugee-background students are largely represented in HE literature in relation to 'their difficulties' (Vickers et al., 2017, p. 198). Tofighian (2018) identifies six 'damaging tropes' used to represent refugee-background people: a 'caged person' who has 'escaped to the West'; a 'desperate supplicant'; a 'struggling overcomer' or 'battler'; a 'tragic and miserable victim'; a 'broken human being'; and a 'mystic sage' or 'trickster' (p. 535).

Tofighian argues that tropes reflect essentialised idea(l)s that are damaging in their effects, and calls for interpretations grounded in engagement with the 'epistemic resources' of refugee-background people themselves (p. 536). Similarly, Marginson (2014, p. 7) calls for researchers to shift from an 'adjustment' to a 'self-formation' paradigm in research with international students, and a focus on 'the active agency of international students themselves' (p. 9). Tran

(2013, p. 1269) links self-formation to mobility (defined as 'fluidity, flow and dynamism'), and the divergent ways in which 'international students imagine their spatial movement as producing new conditions and possibilities for the transformation of themselves and identity re-construction'.

Women are ambivalently positioned in HE. As noted in the UNHCR and Global Education Monitoring Report (2016), more women than men globally are enrolled in HE, but in low-income countries, far fewer women than men access HE and far more women are illiterate. Women's lack of access to HE then inhibits their capacity to influence healthcare provision and legal frameworks, and to access employment and leadership opportunities (UNHCR and Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016). Where women are able to access HE, gendered assumptions that valorise an 'independent scholar' ideal render care work and family and community commitments invisible, disproportionately impacting women (Bullen and Kenway, 2003; Johnson et al., 2000; Anderson, 2012). Women's access to education is also disproportionately impacted by cultural expectations, experiences of displacement, legislative frameworks and geographical location (UNESCO, 2018).

Theoretical framework

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

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

Our study adds to this work through its inclusion of refugee-background women alongside international students. Marginson's (2014) notion of strong agency could be seen as particularly salient here. We find the term 'ambivalence' helpful — both mobility and agency are ambivalent for people who must navigate real and metaphorical borders (e.g. oceans, checkpoints, fences and policy exclusion) in order to seek refuge. Borderlands scholarship recognises agency as a kind of 'necessary skilfulness' rather than individual 'choice', when people move between social worlds in which they experience degrees of marginalisation (Lugones

1987; also see Ahmed, 1999; Anderson, 2012). Our study was shaped by an interest in international study as involving both mobility and immobility, agency and constraint (Anderson et al., 2018; Cresswell, 2010). Specifically, we were interested in women's mobility, self-formation and experiences of international study alongside the relational entanglements that shaped their choices, or the meanings they ascribed to their study experiences and hoped-for futures (Ahmed, 1999; Anderson et al., 2018; Cresswell, 2010). Next, we describe our study contexts.

The study contexts

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

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

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

In contrast, NZ is an island nation of around five million people located on the southwestern rim of Oceania. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it stood out internationally for its reliance on income generated through 'education exports' (Lewis, 2005). In 2017, 'international education' (primarily, the 'sale' of a NZ education to full-fee-paying international students) constituted 'New Zealand's fourth largest export industry' (New Zealand Government, 2017,

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

p. 2). NZ is a signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees and later (1967) Protocol (UNHCR, 2010). People granted refugee status become permanent residents, with the same access to healthcare and education as other NZers. However, NZ accepts a very small number of refugees and asylum seekers — most, through the UNHCR quota system (officially, 1500 annually, but currently far fewer due to pandemic-related border closures).

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

Methodology

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

We recruited participants in 2018 through personal networks, email and posters, after obtaining ethical approvals from each university. At University A, 17 students agreed to participate, including 10 from refugee (or refugee-like) backgrounds. At University B, 21 students agreed to participate, including four who had come to NZ as refugees. Our interviews were semi-structured, and our questions, open-ended. Held as informal conversations over food, they were responsive to the students' leading. We gave students a basic interview schedule beforehand, which was chronological in its structure. Our questions invited the women to describe themselves, their families and their childhood educational aspirations; to tell us about their educational journeys to date, including factors that had been helpful or challenging in terms of their education; to describe their experiences in their current study contexts; and to discuss their aspirations for the future. We also asked the women to share any advice they would give their younger selves, and any other thoughts about their HE journeys or hoped-for futures. Some women came with prepared written responses which they used as a basis for discussion, while others responded to our questions on the spot. Each interview was audiotaped, with women's permission.

Our analytic process involved several steps. First, interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and checked with the speaker, who was invited to make adjustments as she saw fit. Then, with our research questions in mind, we analysed the transcripts in two ways: (1) by

focusing on the narratives as a whole, noting the broad 'shape' of students' accounts in both a chronological and an emotional sense, and (2) identifying themes and contradictions that emerged within and across them (Bruner, 1991; Holloway and Freshwater, 2009). Specifically, we were interested in the barriers and enablers that the women identified; women's aspirations and how these changed over time; the educational challenges and navigational strategies they mentioned; and their references to identities, embodiment, emotion, family, community and belonging (Bruner, 1991; Kraus, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1995). We turn now to the women's narratives.

Findings

As noted, recent scholarship has advocated for a focus on the agency of mobile students (Marginson, 2014; Madge et al., 2015). The women in our study spoke as mobile agents, but agency appeared in their accounts in different ways. Most women foregrounded familial and community entanglements that shaped their actions in and experiences of HE, and their imagined futures. There was no simple distinction between women based in NZ and Bangladesh or refugee-background and international students in this regard. However, more choice and less precarity were evident in women's narratives where they held national citizenship status (sometimes, more than one), were actively supported by family members, and/or had the financial means to move. Only one NZ-based woman positioned herself as a mobile agent with largely unfettered freedom to move (Waters, 2017). We begin with her narrative, and then consider the other women's accounts, in which women revealed a sense of mobile agency shaped by familial, and sometimes community commitments. We consider the women's narratives by theme rather than location, while highlighting contextual specificities where necessary.

Mobile agency as the freedom to move

Most women's narratives in our study illustrated the inadequacy of conflating internationalised HE with unfettered movement (Forstorp and Mellström, 2013; Waters, 2017), and agency with autonomy (Madge et al., 2009). Kirsten's narrative was an exception due to her confident articulation of autonomy, freedom and personal choice. Kirsten, a NZ-based participant with dual European Union and American citizenship, was born in Austria to university-educated parents, and raised in Austria and the USA. She described coming to NZ explicitly as a means to claim autonomy, since her siblings were studying in the USA and Austria: 'It was going to be *my* thing and not my siblings' … I wasn't going to be following one of their paths. It was going to be *my* path' (emphasis added). Kirsten positioned herself as a self-forming agent faced with a generous '[menu] of the possible' (Marginson, 2014, p. 11).

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

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

Mobile agency as movement within/despite entanglements

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

Family as a source of sustenance and support

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

Two NZ-based students described family as a critical source of emotional support. Sefina and Mariam were both first-year students — Sefina, a scholarship-funded international student from Samoa; and Mariam, a former refugee from Afghanistan. Both associated family with a sense of 'being-at-home' (Ahmed, 1999), or affective well-being during international study, and as a condition of mobile agency. Mariam's family had gained refuge in NZ 4 years prior to our interview, and moved with Mariam to her university city. Mariam revealed a strong sense of 'homeliness' due to her family's presence (Ahmed, 1999), and described proximity to family as a key consideration in relation to her imagined future. She said, 'I [don't] think of where I want to work or live, I enjoy being with my family so yeah, if they are with me, I am happy… [Home] is where people love me'. In contrast, Sefina left her family in Samoa to come and study in NZ. Here, she describes her departure:

> Everybody came to see me off, not only from my Dad's side but from my Mum's side, all my Mum's siblings and children so my cousins, uncles, aunties, all of them … there

> was heaps of them in the airport that night. My grandparents, they all came … I was crying … Saying goodbye was … very, very hard.

Sefina represents international study as an emotionally costly, deeply valued family investment. Her account reveals 'transformation and disequilibrium' (Marginson, 2014, p. 8), due to the 'movement away' from home (Ahmed, 1999, p. 341). Here, she recalls a period of homesickness following her departure:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Family as a source of obligation and regulation

Other women also revealed a sense of obligation and noted the regulatory power of families and communities in relation to both self and community-formation (Marginson, 2014). In this, their accounts highlighted the ambivalence of mobile agency, or the inadequacy of valorising 'mobility, choice and individual agency over and above any structural constraints that student migrants might face' (Waters, 2017, p. 288).

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

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

Priya represented international study as a source of personal and parental pride, but also as extremely costly. She expressed a deep sense of obligation to 'come to a good position' given her parents' sacrifice, but worried that further studies risked jeopardising her father's health.

For Priya, access to mobile agency required 'hard choices' (Marginson, 2014, p. 16) that implicated her family, not just herself. She said, 'I'm happy but the thing is, inside of me, I'm stressed. I always remember, I have to pay, I have to pay'.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mary valued the learning acquired through international study, but she refused to valorise so-called Western knowledge or associate criticality solely with Western thought or (loud) resistance (Singh and Han, 2016; Doherty and Singh, 2005). Mary's refusal to conflate

Western knowledge with learning or prestige was also evident in her response to the question, 'Where do you want to go next?'. She replied:

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

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

Discussion

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

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

The women's narratives in our study exemplify how 'international study should not simply be thought of as a movement occurring at a discrete point in time, but rather as an ongoing process inherent to ever-changing mobile lives' (Madge et al., 2015, p. 685). Women's accounts of their university education sat within broader narratives of familial (and intergenerational) movement, and sometimes, displacement, and their accounts incorporated past circumstances as well as future aspirations. However, women's narratives also exemplified the unevenness of the 'global terrain' in which international study takes place (p. 691) — not just in terms of whose knowledge is valued and by whom, but also in terms of women's differential access to mobile agency, the extent to which this was mediated by others and the confidence with which women could name their hoped-for post-study futures.

Madge et al. (2015) argue for the need to recognise how students as mobile agents shape international study, and in so doing, destabilise simplistic (Western-centric) understandings of 'the international'. While women's narratives revealed differential access to the 'choice' of

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

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

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

What are the implications for teachers and policy-makers of the entangled complexities that shape international study? We suggest that, just as attention to international study as a multi-scalar, contingent undertaking has the potential to inform our capacity to *'make the international differently'* (Madge et al., 2015, p. 694, emphasis original), so attention to students' broader webs of commitment, constraint, aspiration and human need might lead us to begin to *make HE differently*. Our study joins earlier literature in contesting assumptions of students' autonomy in (internationalised) HE (Anderson, 2012; Bullen and Kenway, 2003; Johnson et al., 2000). Recognition of entanglements shaping international study calls for policies,

practices and pedagogies that are humble and careful — informed by recognition of the differential costs of international study for students and their families, the necessary agency of those who access it (Anderson, 2014), and its potential for forming and transforming not only students' lives but also the lives and life chances of students' families and communities. In practical terms, HE institutions should work to mitigate factors that limit students' agency (Marginson, 2014), or the weight of responsibility students carry in accessing HE (Anderson et al., 2020). This might be through offering targeted scholarship funding for students who are in socially or financially precarious positions; ongoing social support to address the disequilibrium (and for some, pressures) inherent in international study (Marginson, 2014); recognition of mobile students as epistemological as well as mobile agents — who bring and translate knowledge across study and living contexts (Osborne et al., 2020); opportunities for returning students to reflect on their imagined futures, including the disequilibrium of return (Anderson et al., 2018) and potential challenges of navigating gendered realities; and the promotion of pathways to citizenship for displaced or stateless students through HE. Marginson (2014) suggests that HE teaching should build a 'conscious agency' amongst mobile students, and 'work with it, rather than suborning or coercing it' (p. 19). We would suggest that HE institutions also need to develop conscious agency amongst themselves, marked by deep recognition of their responsibilities towards the students they recruit and enrol, of students' diverse circumstances, and of HE outcomes as impacting families and communities' futures, not just students' (Madge et al., 2009).

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

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