Academic mobility in higher education
UNESCO - a global leader in education

Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation for peace and sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education, providing global and regional leadership to drive progress, strengthening the resilience and capacity of national systems to serve all learners. UNESCO also leads efforts to respond to contemporary global challenges through transformative learning, with special focus on gender equality and Africa across all actions.

The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.
The 2019 UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education (HE) defines academic mobility as the ‘physical or virtual movement of individuals outside their country for the purpose of studying, researching and teaching’. This inclusive definition of mobility recognises the contemporary importance of distance-learning and cross-border higher education (CBHE). Along with students travelling to study, university campuses, degree programmes and curricula are also mobile. The UNESCO Global Convention, building on the Regional Conventions (such as the Lisbon convention) seeks to promote all forms of academic mobility by setting out universal principles for the fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of foreign qualifications, a process that requires trust in the quality of provision.

Post COVID-19, growth in physical student mobility is likely to continue because of the opportunities it offers for immersive linguistic, learning, and cultural experiences. Yet unregulated growth is ecologically unsustainable, and exacerbates social, economic, and educational divides between those who can travel and those who cannot, as well as between different modes of mobility. Inequities in physical mobility are also geopolitical: war and conflict create instability and a search for academic refuge, whilst restrictive visa regimes and recognition policies continue.

The growth of virtual student mobility, accelerated by COVID-19, also presents pressing policy challenges. These include inequalities in digital access, the growing commercialization of cross-border and online provision, continued concerns about quality and slow progress in converging approaches to degree recognition.

Looking to 2030, hybrid combinations of physical and virtual mobility will provide the best range of mobility opportunities for the world’s students and researchers. These combinations will widen access to lifelong HE, offer a diversity of flexible study opportunities in a multipolar world, and provide opportunities for transnational research training.

This background paper is based on the input of more than 30 researchers and policymakers to three focus groups, as well as on a wide-ranging global literature review. It reviews shifting understandings of academic mobility, summarising recent research on student (and researcher) mobility, as well as on assuring the quality of CBHE. It links these debates to broader concerns about the sustainability of skills migration in an unequal global knowledge economy. The final part of the background document focuses on the UNESCO 2019 Global Convention and the links between quality assurance, recognition, and mobility. It ends with a series of policy recommendations for HED, leading up to 2030.
Acknowledgements

With the purpose of producing updated analysis and recommendations for the 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022), UNESCO organized the Technical Expert Group (TEG), whose members were tasked with preparing background documents on each of the main themes of the Conference. Experts participating in the TEG included César Guadalupe, Dag Olav Hessen, Susanna Karakhanyan, Achim Hopbach, Mpine Makoe, David Mills, Ka Ho Mok, Kilemi Mwiria, Jamil Salmi, Sylvia Schmelkes, Francesc Pedró, Damtew Teferra. This is one of the TEG’s background documents, which respectively approached the following themes:

- Impact of COVID-19 on higher education
- Higher education and the SDGs¹
- Equity, inclusion, and pluralism
- Quality and relevance of programmes
- Academic mobility in higher education
- Governance in higher education
- Financing higher education
- Data and knowledge production
- International cooperation to enhance synergies
- The futures of higher education

The following UNESCO focal points participated in or provided support, at different moments, to the TEG’s activities: Dana Abdrasheva, Daniele Viera, Phoebe Kirkup, Paz Portales, Victoria Galán, Huong Nguyen, Hassmik Tortian, Qingling Kong, Peter Wells, Harold Mera, Takudzwa Mutize, Talal El Hourani, José Antonio Quinteiro, Keith Holmes and Emma Sabzalieva. The TEG’s activities were directly coordinated by José Luis Guzmán.

The TEG met online four times throughout 2021 (March 24, May 19, July 21, and September 8) and held an in-person meeting in Barcelona on 29-30 November 2021. Besides extensive literature review, the process of elaborating the documents included 24 online consultation meetings facilitated by the TEG members. These meetings involved more than 180 experts or stakeholders from all regions of the world. In addition, the TEG members considered comments provided by diverse reviewers for each theme and a technical team of UNESCO specialists reviewed the final versions.

Grateful thanks to all those who participated in the focus groups, whose ideas and suggestions inform this document, many of whom also offered detailed feedback and comments on drafts. Thanks go to Mr Peter Wells and Ms Qingling Kong for acting as focal points, and the whole of the UNESCO team, including IESALC, for support and guidance.

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<td>ANQAHE</td>
<td>Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education</td>
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<td>APQN</td>
<td>Asia-Pacific Quality Network</td>
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<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
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<td>AUQA</td>
<td>Australian Universities Quality Agency</td>
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<td>The Arab States</td>
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<td>CBHE</td>
<td>Cross-border higher education</td>
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<td>ECTS</td>
<td>European Credit Transfer Scheme</td>
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<td>ENIC</td>
<td>European Network of Information Centres</td>
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<td>ERASMUS</td>
<td>European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University</td>
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<td>European Qualifications Passport for Refugees</td>
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<td>QA</td>
<td>Quality assurance</td>
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<td>STEM</td>
<td>Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics</td>
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<td>UNESCO</td>
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What is ‘academic mobility’?
Academic mobility is the fifth theme of the 2022 UNESCO World Higher Education conference (WHEC). The 2019 UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education (hereafter the Global Convention) defines academic mobility as the ‘physical or virtual movement of individuals outside their country for the purpose of studying, researching and teaching’.

This inclusive definition of mobility acknowledges the changing nature of international and transnational HED provision. There has been a massive growth in the physical mobility of students over the last two decades, with 5.3 million students studying abroad in 2017 up from 2 million in 2000. At the same time online distance learning, and other forms of cross-border higher education (CBHE) provision, are contributing to a rise in virtual academic mobility, with all the challenges that new forms of provision present for regulators and quality assurance (OECD/UNESCO 2005). Academic mobility is at once a normative ideal, an empirical fact and a policy dilemma.

Student and researcher mobility pathways are shaped by histories and geopolitics, but also by differentials in educational and employment opportunities, as well as other non-economic factors, such as political stability and religious or cultural similarity. Flows and patterns are increasingly complex and multidirectional, with students making mobility decisions based on their perceptions of quality of provision, as well as by supply-side migration incentives and constraints, such as state funding for inward and outward mobility, and restrictive visa policies. Mobility is often the consequence of state policy decisions, such as decisions to attract home diasporic communities (Larner, 2007) or to insist scholars return home after study abroad (Brooks and Waters, 2021), and these policy processes need further study (Riano et al., 2018).

The growth of CBHE provision, through distance learning, regional educational hubs, international campuses, and franchising agreements makes for an increasingly complex and diverse global ‘eduscape’ (Forstorp and Mellstrom, 2013). Increasingly it is the institutions that are mobile, with university campuses, degree programmes and curricula crossing borders. The policy discourse around the ‘internationalization’ of HED (Altbach and Knight, 2007) has been redefined by new mobility trends, and it is increasingly used to index a whole range of changes and futures within HED (de Wit and Altbach, 2020). Policymakers also interpret academic mobility in a range of ways, with an eye to domestic political interests (Brooks, 2018).

This document takes up the policy implications of UNESCO’s inclusive definition of academic mobility and explores the challenges that the UNESCO Global Convention sets out to address. It argues that HED policy debates have been hampered by fragmented conceptions of knowledge mobilities (Raghuram, 2013; Madge et al., 2015), with largely separate academic literatures on academic staff mobility, international student mobility, skills migration, quality assurance, internationalization, and cross border provision. Until recently research has focused on dominant mobility flows to (and within) Europe, Australia and North America, and later Asia (Collins, 2013), with less focus on mobilities across the global South, or on the relationship between the quality of provision and mobility strategies. This background document seeks to integrate these debates and literatures, making recommendations for 2030.
The discussion of academic mobility in the 2009 UNESCO WHEC Trends report (Altbach and Reisberg, 2010) focused primarily on physical movement, noting two main trends: Asian students travelling to Europe, the US and Australia, and the success of the ERASMUS programme facilitating mobility within Europe. Recognising the limitations of existing data on academic mobility, it raised concerns about the ‘concentration of academic talent in the developed world’ and the growing risks of ‘international academic inequality’ (25). Altbach and Reisberg (2010) also emphasised the importance of mutual recognition of qualifications, and the important role of UNESCO’s regional conventions in ‘easing the mobility’ of individuals within regions.

This background document maps developments since 2010. It reviews a decade of growing academic mobility as well as changes in understandings of the term. It identifies key challenges facing world HED leading up to 2030 and makes a number of policy recommendations. The document is divided into three sections, bringing together the findings from expert focus groups and academic research on student mobilities, researcher mobilities and quality assurance. Summarising recent academic and policy literatures in these fields, the document asks how best to promote student, academic and institutional mobilities that are diverse, inclusive and sustainable, as part of the 2030 Education vision of equitable access to quality HED and support lifelong learning opportunities for all.3

Wary of ‘normative globalism’ (Marginson, 2021b) this document pays close attention to the political economy of global HE, including the geopolitical dimensions of control over student mobility and academic migration by state actors. Private providers play an increasingly important role within HED systems, but HED remains a vital public good. The shift to digital provision comes with risks of increasing commercialization and profit-making, and poor-quality provision. Affordability and quality remain key concerns for students and raising the quality of CBHE remains a policy priority (OECD, 2006; Hartmann, 2010).

The document ends by highlighting the importance of states ratifying the UNESCO 2019 Global Convention. This will build on the achievements of regional conventions4, and encourage the harmonization of educational standards at a global level. Cross-border recognition of qualifications is key to removing barriers and facilitating further academic mobility. In a fast-moving field, the rapid growth of CBHE puts pressure on existing regulatory and accreditation processes.

The growth in virtual academic mobility, as signalled in the Global Convention, also opens new policy dilemmas. These include inequalities in digital access, the growing commercialization of online provision, and the lack of shared approaches to Quality Assurance and degree recognition. It also offers new opportunities, including widening access to lifelong HED, a growing diversity of flexible study opportunities (such as hybrid modes, combining distance learning with periods of travel and study abroad), and the rise of micro-credentials and ‘stackable’ qualifications. Finally, and importantly, as part of a more critical and sustainable approach to university internationalization, this trend potentially mitigates the growing global emissions associated with physical mobility (Shields, 2019).

3. Article II, Section II, Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education 2019
02.

Student mobility
The mobility of scholars is integral to the creation of new knowledge. The first medieval European universities began with students travelling from city to city to study with masters of particular subjects, who held lectures in private halls and churches (Welch, 2005). Movement and knowledge are also connected in Islamic learning.

Today, international student mobility is growing at an unprecedented scale. In 2019, according to UNESCO, there were over 6 million students studying abroad, a three-fold increase from just over 2 million in 2000 (UNESCO-IESALC, 2022; Varghese, 2008). Figure 1 visualises this growth. Before COVID-19, international student numbers were forecast to grow to 8 million by 2025, driven by the demand for high quality international education within a global knowledge economy, both to access skills and new labour markets, but also to differentiate oneself from peers. Post-pandemic, this growth is likely to continue, but predictions are subject to ever more geopolitical uncertainty, as the fate of more than 70,000 international students studying in Ukraine has sadly highlighted. Only 2.6 per cent of all students travel internationally, with physical mobility long seen as a mark of privilege. Whilst mobile student populations are becoming more diverse in their social and class composition, mobility pathways and provision are becoming more vertically stratified as a result. This section reviews these student mobility trends, reviewing recent research on both physical and virtual student mobility.

Figure 1. Global growth in student mobility 2000-2019.

Source: UNESCO-IESALC 2022. Data available to download at https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/eCSJN/2/
Patterns of student mobility are shaped by geopolitics, history, and geography: new and unexpected trends will continue to emerge. The first generation of large-scale student mobility began with migration to the United States during the cold war. In 1998, student migration was primarily to Australia, Europe and North America (Shields, 2013). Twenty years later, these flows continue, but are increasingly being supplemented by new destinations and regional flows. In 2020, pre-COVID-19, the U.S hosted 1 million students (18 per cent of all international students), the UK and Australia around 500,000, whilst Canada, Germany, and the Russian Federation all hosted almost 300,000 students (UNESCO, 2022). Students from Asia made up 57 per cent of all international students within the OECD, and in 2020, China was the largest country of origin, with more than 650,000 students studying abroad in 2018, with many looking beyond the US and UK to other European countries and Australasia.

Pre COVID-19, China was an increasingly attractive study destination for students from across Asia, especially from the Republic of Korea, but also from the US. China also offered a growing number of scholarships to African nationals, with an estimated 70,000 African students studying in China in 2019. These trends suddenly stalled in 2020, and after two years of strict related travel restrictions, the future of inbound student mobility into China remains uncertain. Some Chinese ‘outbound’ students are increasingly looking beyond the US and UK, both to Australasia and other European countries.

Meanwhile, the European Union was host to 1.7 million students in 2018, with France and Germany being major study destinations. Mobility within Europe is also changing. Over its 30-year existence, the ERASMUS programme has facilitated the mobility of 10 million students and researchers, and in its most recent iteration (Erasmus+) the programme continues to evolve. There has been a shift to shorter exchanges, less exposure and more international students studying at home (Shields, 2016; Sin et al., 2018).

Figure 2. Percentage of students who are internationally mobile by region.

Source: UNESCO-IESALC 2022. Data available to download at https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/BX7PL/1/
There are growing levels of regional mobility within the Global South (see Figure 2), as countries such as South Africa, the Republic of Korea, Brazil, Egypt, Turkey and Malaysia increasingly attract international students and position themselves as regional hubs (Kondakci et al., 2018), as well as a growing number of ‘special education zones’ in the Middle East and across Southeast Asia (Kleibert et al., 2020). Some 80 per cent of international students in South Africa are from elsewhere on the continent, but Angola is also an emerging hub, whilst Portugal and France host large numbers of African students. South-south academic mobility is on the rise, complementing existing patterns of south-north academic mobility. UNESCO’s Institute of Statistics tracks these trends, but there are often reporting delays from countries.

In Asia, the harmonization of standards in the ASEAN region has helped facilitate the recognition of qualifications and academic mobility. Changes in the numbers of Chinese students studying abroad will have far-reaching implications for the region, whilst growing numbers of African students now come to China (Mulvey, 2020).

In Africa, Uganda has become a regional hub for East African students whilst South Africa has positioned itself as a continental research training hub, with ambitious plans to grow its doctoral student numbers, but also faces questions about how many of these students return to their countries of origin (Kahn, 2019). In the Arab region and across the South Mediterranean, there are growing mobility opportunities, despite fragmented accreditation and governance challenges, as well as constraints on academic freedom and internet access (ElAmine, 2019; Hanafi and Arvanitis, 2016; Rensimer, 2015).

International student mobility is strongly shaped by discipline and level of study. Figure 3 highlights the high level of international PhD student enrolment across the OECD. Internationally mobile PhD students make up 22 per cent of all research students, compared to only 6 per cent of all student enrolment (OECD 2020). Levels of internationalization vary widely between systems, but countries with high numbers of international PhD students are also more likely to have high numbers of foreign-born faculty, with several OECD countries having around 40 per cent (Franzoni et al. 2015). It may be that postgraduate study increasingly dominates physical student mobility.

**Figure 3. International student enrolment by level of study as a percentage of total enrolment in Higher Education 2018.**

[Diagram image]

*Note: All tertiary education includes short-cycle tertiary programmes, which are not presented separately in the figure. 1. Data on short-cycle tertiary programmes are based on nationality and refer to the Flemish community only. 2. Year of reference 2017. Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of international or foreign students in tertiary education.

Source, OECD Education at a glance 2020) Data available at [https://stat.link/cwlnud](https://stat.link/cwlnud)
Decisions about student mobility are often linked to individual migration plans and need to be considered in the light of state migration policies (Raghuram, 2013). The continued growth in physical student mobility is partly driven by economic considerations, including the student income generated by host countries, and the opportunity to attract global talent. The recent UK decision to provide up to three years post-study work visas for PhD students exemplifies this connection. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the fragility of a HED financing model dependent on inbound students, such as in Australia and New Zealand, where a sudden drop in student numbers has had severe consequences (Sidhu et al., 2021; Bergan et al., 2021).

Government policies (including visa restrictions), bi-lateral exchange agreements, and institutional strategies all drive student mobility. Scholarships have long been a means of exerting soft power, and India and China are also this model of international diplomacy (Mulvey, 2020; Varghese, 2020). By the same token, mobility to Europe and North America continues to be limited by restrictive visa regimes, border restrictions and state surveillance. The European qualifications passport for refugees (EQPR), an initiative of the Council of Europe, is an important response, especially in the light of the Ukraine crisis.

As student mobility trends diversify in a multipolar world, questions of educational quality, equity, student rights, and justice become ever more important, highlighting the importance of the Global Convention. At the same time the role of mobility in HED is changing. The rise of ‘virtual’ academic mobility through cross-border provision has implications for the future of physical student mobility.

2.2. The rise of CBHE and ‘virtual’ mobility

Increasingly it is not just the students who move. HED programmes and providers are also internationally mobile. There are many new forms of CBHE on offer, defined in the 2019 UNESCO Global Convention as the movement of ‘people, knowledge, programmes, providers and curriculum’ across borders. These include international joint degrees, distance learning provision, franchising agreements, virtual exchanges, educational hubs, multi-campus universities, off-shore campuses, twinning partnerships and dual/joint degrees. Scholarship on CBHE (e.g., Altbach and Knight, 2007; 2021; Olds, 2007; Teichler, 1996; 2007) has tracked both this increasing complexity, and innovative models of provision, over the last 20 years. Kleibert et al. (2020a) note how there are now almost 500 offshore campuses run by foreign universities (the majority are French, US and UK institutions), often in major international cities and named as ‘transnational educational hubs’. There have been consistent concerns about the quality of some cross-border provision (e.g., Kember, 2010; Waters and Leung, 2017; Rensimer, 2015).

Physically mobile students represent only a very small proportion (2.6 per cent) of all HED students (UNESCO, 2022). The growth and diversity of other genres of CBHE (including the rise of virtual and hybrid forms of student mobility) offer more study flexibility and open up access to new communities of students, especially those in the majority world (Laurillard and Kennedy, 2017) including those with caring responsibilities, or otherwise unable to travel. They also reduce the impact of economic status on mobility and could also promote lifelong learning through innovations such as micro-credentials and stackable degrees. It is unclear if this emerging provision will change attitudes to physical mobility, given the role that migration continues to play in the reproduction of social advantage (Waters, 2010; 2012).
In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated universities’ existing internationalization and digital strategies, as the whole world shifted online. It presented unprecedented challenges and opportunities for institutions, both in their immediate responses and their long-term strategy (Mok, 2020). What may have been isolated experiments in online learning have become normalised.

This transformation has the potential to open access to learning, reducing the economic barriers and environmental consequences of physical mobility (Bergan et al., 2021). The digital campus has suddenly become the core of HED provision in many countries, making use of both synchronous and asynchronous digital learning platforms, and online resources. At the same time, the digital divide is associated with widening educational inequalities, with different levels of access to online learning. Research suggests that the pandemic will lead to a lasting change in patterns of physical mobility, especially in Asia (Mok, 2021, Bista et al., 2021). It is too early to tell whether attitudes to virtual mobility have been transformed, though emerging research highlights how students adapted to this new provision (e.g., Mato-Díaz et al., 2021). There are inevitably limits to online provision, given the importance of developing practical clinical skills in the health professions, or laboratory skills in the natural sciences and engineering. Yet, even here, simulations are increasingly common.

It is likely that new forms of hybrid provision will emerge. ‘Virtual’ mobility may well complement, rather than replace, existing physical mobilities. One risk is that mobility becomes increasingly stratified, with physical mobility remaining the preserve of the wealthiest students, whilst virtual mobility gets commodified, generating income for commercial providers, potentially excluding the poorest students. Study online can also create mental health and wellbeing challenges, with growing numbers dropping out from online courses.

HED institutions will need to support these new models of sustainable and inclusive internationalization whilst seeking to minimise the digital divide. Digital rights – including access to the internet and to computing technology – become increasingly important. The rise of digital provision may lead to increasing commercialization and profit-making from private sector control of HED learning and research platforms (Salmi and Tavares, 2016; Bacevic, 2019; Mirowski, 2018). An inclusive global HED system depends on addressing the political challenges of both physical and digital access.

The hybridization of mobility presents new challenges for quality assurance and regulation. Inequalities in digital access, the risks of poor-quality online provision, and the growing commercialization of provision pose quality challenges for CBHE (Rosa et al., 2016; Karakhanyan and Stensaker, 2020). These concerns are not new, and in 2006, OECD/UNESCO issued the Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education as a way to minimise the risks of what it called ‘rogue providers’ and ‘degree mills’ (Hartmann, 2010). This was complemented in 2007 by the Council of Europe/UNESCO Code of Good Practice in Transnational Education. With an ever-growing number of providers and mechanisms of delivery, up-to-date guidelines for good practice remain important. Hopbach (2016, 2022) reviews the use of these guidelines, and the changes that have occurred since their launch.

The future of sustainable international student mobility will depend on creative combinations of digital pedagogies and hybrid provision, including online and via distance learning. There are a number of long-established models of collaborative online learning (such as the SUNY COIL centre, or the ErasmusVirtual scheme) from which to learn.
A range of disciplines contribute to our understanding of international student mobility. Work on the economic and political drivers is increasingly complemented by comparative sociological case studies of student mobility in different empirical settings (e.g., Brooks and Waters, 2011; Waters and Brooks, 2021). Brooks and Waters (2021) highlight how the understandings of the ‘international’ as a privileged and exclusive space have prevented policymakers and researchers from focusing on the growing stratification of mobility, the hierarchization of the ‘international’, and discrimination experienced by international students. To date, there has been little discussion of how national debates about equitable participation need an international dimension (Tannock, 2018), including international students in policy debates around equity, access and quality (Hayes, 2017).

Lipura and Collins (2020) review different explanatory models of educational mobility and migration. They highlight the dominance of ‘push-pull’ economic explanations that treat individual students as rational economic actors, making careful cost-benefit analyses. Others offer sociological explanations of how mobility enables the accumulation of cultural (and economic) capital, with choices mediated by family and social networks, or by educational brokers. Much of this research reinforces the presumed value of a degree from the global North. They suggest that there has not been sufficient attention to other forms and rationales for mobility. As a result, scholars are increasingly attentive to emotions, to how desire and aspiration drive mobility decisions, and to the temporality of mobility (Yang, 2015; Collins and Shubin, 2017; Carling and Collins, 2018). There is also emerging research on digital migration (Collins, 2020) and the ethics of migration (Collins, 2021).

Qualitative research on mobilities, often carried out by international students themselves, has strengthened the focus on student emotions, understandings, and identities (Bista et al., 2019). Work has highlighted rising concerns about student wellbeing in a digital environment, student debt, non-completion and concerns about graduate employment. Madge et al. (2015) argue for combining an attention to student experiences with analyses of the underlying political structures and power relations.

Within Europe, fostering student mobility has been part of the European political project (Curaj et al., 2021), facilitating the reimagining of Europe (Brooks, 2018a; 2018b). These flows have been unequal, with some countries attracting most students (Shields and Edwards, 2010), and others enacting border controls and reducing Erasmus mobility (Sin et al., 2018). Refugee movements triggered by conflicts in Syria and elsewhere highlight the importance of the EPQR initiative.

Prioritising physical student mobility may not promote mobile learning, or necessarily be conducive to the movement of ideas and knowledge. The hybridization of physical mobility and virtual mobility may become increasingly common. Jöns (2018) conceptualises this as a ‘triad’ of actors and actants (material, hybrid and immaterial) that together shape this new world. There is an emerging body of empirical research on these new combinations of institutional and individual mobility, including studies of international branch campuses and transnational educational hubs (Gunter and Raghuram, 2018; Mittelmeier et al., 2019; Kleibert et al., 2020).
03. 

Researcher mobility
Researcher mobility has increased rapidly in recent decades, facilitated by the globalization of science (Marginson, 2021a), the growth of research collaborations and a global competition for research talent. Whilst this mobility can be traced back to the colonial networks and exchanges facilitated by an ‘empire of scholars’ (Pietsch, 2013; Jöns, 2008; 2011), much of this mobility has emerged in recent years: in 1979 only 1.2 per cent of articles were collaboratively authored, compared to more than 22 per cent in 2018 (Marginson, 2021a).

Economic inequality and competition between countries and universities for research ‘talent’ is likely to increase, given the close links between science and cognitive capitalism. Academic mobility is often one-way, and prestigious Euro-American universities continue to win the race for ‘talent’. Institutional mobility policies can lead to the recruitment of international graduate students and research staff as a form of academic ‘in-sourcing’ (Cantwell, 2011; Taylor and Cantwell, 2015).

Concerns about what was called ‘brain drain’ from the developing world first emerged in the 1960s (Raghuram, 2009). Critics have pointed out that the term risks blaming migrants themselves, oversimplifying colonial and postcolonial histories of training and the flows of skills between states and treats mobility as an economic resource (Fahey and Kenway, 2010; Agarwal, 2011). The terms ‘brain mobility’ or ‘brain circulation’ better capture the importance of regional knowledge ecologies, the temporality of mobility over a career, the possibilities (and uncertainties) facing returning scholars and the contribution of academic diasporas. In understanding the intensification of mobility, exchange and collaboration, it is important to move beyond the unhelpful dichotomization of global North versus global South (Sabzalieva et al., 2020), whilst also heeding calls to decolonise unequal research partnerships, an issue vividly illustrated by the Bukavu series.

3.1. New research on researcher mobility and the future of global science

There are many reasons for researchers to travel and work internationally. It is a way of building new skills, accessing research infrastructures, growing scientific knowledge, extending academic networks and benefitting from the symbolic capital that comes with international affiliation. Researcher mobility is also the product of deliberate recruitment strategies by states and elite research universities (Khattab and Fenton, 2015; Cantwell, 2011).

Economic analyses (e.g., Kato and Ando, [2017]) point to the evidence supporting the positive (and unidirectional) impact of academic mobility on researcher collaboration. Studies of researcher mobility draw on surveys (Franzoni et al., 2015) and bibliographic data (Verginer and Riccaboni, 2020), but much of this work has focused on researcher migration to and within Europe and North America. A recent systematic review of 96 studies on researcher mobility (Netz, Hampal and Aman, 2020) provides strong evidence of the positive benefits of physical mobility for individuals’ international networks, as well as, in most cases, for their productivity and scientific impact. Its authors explore the interactions of these different benefits, but also acknowledge that mobility can lead to career instability. Mobility can make it harder for researchers to re-enter domestic scientific networks or use knowledge gained abroad. Policymakers will need to find ways to create academic career tracks that facilitate mobility and return without generating uncertainty. State incentives, local labour markets and economic opportunities can
also help in facilitating researcher mobility to and from emerging hubs across the global South (Ewers et al., 2021).

The benefits of academic mobility for individual researchers and for countries do not always converge. Sustainable brain ‘circulation’ is key to the future of the global science system, requiring policy incentives to strengthen research expertise in countries where science development is most needed.

Policies to promote researcher mobility need to consider all disciplines (not just STEM), including professional fields, given the growing diversity of routes through HE, and support exchanges with industry. Constraints on researcher mobility will need to be rethought, especially as mobility and collaboration becomes central to academic careers. The circulation of ideas is not universal, as shown by the practical and logistical challenges facing scholars from Africa when attending international conferences. Mobility is also shaped by gender. Female scientists in STEM fields, particularly in Africa, can find it hard to enter employment locally and are sometimes forced to remain internationally mobile in order to secure employment.

One response to concerns about research capacity has been the growing interest in the contributions made by academic diasporas (Zeleza, Amagoh and Rahman, 2016), and to South-South collaborations (Sabzalieva et al., 2020). The Open Science movement, also championed by UNESCO and its 2021 Recommendation on Open Science, promotes unrestricted access to scientific publications and data, regardless of migratory status, potentially reducing the importance of physical researcher mobility for scientific careers. Open Science networks, open access conferences and journals facilitate transdisciplinary collaborations, essential to meeting ‘global’ challenges such as the ecological crisis.

Sustainable researcher mobility requires policy attention to working conditions within universities, and to the gendered inequities faced by internationally mobile researchers with family and caring responsibilities (Ackers, 2008; 2010). A shift away from an instrumental focus on research output to encouraging academic service more broadly (such as journal editing, peer review and work for professional associations) would rebalance research cultures, as would funding for academic journals that are international in scope but also support regional knowledge ecosystems.

There has been growing attention to strengthening research capacity in countries in the South as a means to countering academic dependency, especially in the social sciences and humanities. Whilst dependency-style explanations over-simplify the complex multipolar dynamics of the global science system (Marginson and Xu, 2021), emergent regional knowledge ecologies, especially in Latin America, are still positioned at the peripheries of knowledge flows (Guzman-Valenzuela et al., 2019; 2021), or ‘invisibilised’ by dominant patterns of collaboration (Kuzhabekova, 2019).
3.2. New doctoral mobilities and pedagogies

The international literature on doctoral education tracks the gradual convergence of policy debates and the impact of globalization on understandings of the PhD (Nerad and Heggelund, 2008; Nerad, 2014; Yudkevich et al., 2019). Contemporary patterns of international doctoral mobility (and graduate training more broadly) vary widely by field and geography. PhD students are more likely to be mobile than any other students, and in some European countries, almost half of all those pursuing doctoral degrees are international students (see Figure 3). Surveys and international comparisons highlight the different purposes and uses of doctoral education within and between global regions (Hasgall et al., 2019; Yudkevich et al., 2019).

As the importance of participating in a global science system increases (Marginson, 2018), creative new approaches to doctoral mobility are emerging. These include short and medium-term mobility (physical and virtual) of doctoral students (e.g., through exchange schemes) to facilitate the exchange of ideas, as well as distance and hybrid doctoral training programmes (including online workshops and virtual supervision). Other approaches include digital research collaborations and supervision, as well as creative new approaches to research training and doctoral funding etc. The 2019 Hannover recommendations set out proposals for fostering greater access and equity within global doctoral education.
04. Quality assurance, qualification recognition and student mobility
Student mobility is driven by the perceived quality and reputation of HED systems, which in turn depends on trust in the quality assurance processes that underpin the mutual recognition of qualifications. The future of equitable and high quality CBHE could be said to pivot on quality assurance. This section explores the new challenges facing the recognition professionals, drawing on insights from the literature and from expert focus groups. It highlights the growing attention paid to quality assurance within successive UNESCO conventions, and the importance of linking assurance to qualification recognition (Zapp and Ramirez, 2019).

UNESCO first prepared and adopted qualification recognition conventions in the 1970s, through a series of regional conferences (Wells, 2014). Their aim was to promote the mutual recognition of qualifications through legal instruments, so students and workers could study and seek employment abroad. They did not seek, initially, to assure the quality of this provision.

A ‘second generation’ of regional conventions began with the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region 1997 (referred to as the Lisbon Recognition Convention). This time the basic principle was different: states were expected to recognise foreign qualifications unless there were ‘substantial differences’ between these and corresponding qualifications in the host state. This convention sets out the role of national information centres (NICs) for sharing information, ‘diploma supplements’ explaining the qualification in a shared format, and the recognition of the qualifications of refugees and displaced people. These revised treaties also gradually incorporated the language of quality assurance. The 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention only mentioned ‘quality’ once, in relation to the justified recognition of qualifications. The 2011 Tokyo Convention for the Asia-Pacific region (a revised version of the 1983 Bangkok Convention) referred explicitly to quality assurance for the first time, ‘defining it as the ongoing process of evaluating and enhancing the quality of a higher education system’. The 2014 Addis Convention for Africa (updating the 1981 Arusha Convention) additionally adopted the language of ‘qualification frameworks’, defining these as ‘systems for classification, registration, publication and articulation of quality assured qualifications.’

The Lisbon Recognition Convention has been ratified by 54 states to date. There has also been progress towards ratification of other regional conventions. 12 of the 46 countries in the Asia-Pacific Region have ratified the 2011 Tokyo Convention, whilst 13 of the 54 African countries have ratified the 2014 Addis Convention and three out of 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have ratified the 2019 Buenos Aires Convention. The Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab States was adopted on 2 February 2022. Regional quality assurance frameworks and communities (such as ASEAN AQAF) have evolved in tandem with these recognition conventions.

These conventions are most effective when national regulatory powers are enforced through funding, policy requirements and legal obligations (Dill, 2011). The challenge for national policy communities is to understand the benefits of ratification, supporting their recognition agencies in developing understandings of quality standards, and the centrality of quality assurance in promoting innovative cross-border provision.

The 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention has, thus far, been the most influential of the regional conventions, partly because of a shared political commitment to fostering effective quality assurance processes and innovative degree provision across the European Higher Education Area. It is being enacted through a range
of implementation mechanisms: recognition networks, qualifications frameworks, diploma supplements and convergent quality assurance processes now exist in almost all countries that are signatories to the Bologna Declaration (1999). Like the other ‘second generation’ conventions, it makes explicit mention of the importance of recognising the qualifications of refugees and displaced persons to facilitate their mobility, entry into HED and the labour market, implemented through the EQRP.

The internationalization of HED and growth in student mobility has led to a parallel internationalization of quality assurance processes. With the increasing diversity and complexity of cross-border provision, a global normative instrument to help secure cross-border recognition of qualifications became important. After five years of preparatory talks, the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications was adopted by the 40th session of the UNESCO General Conference in 2019. It seeks to build on these regional conventions, proposing a set of global principles for fair evaluation of qualifications. A key task for the decade ahead is ratification and implementation of this Convention. The Global Convention is being implemented to complement and supplement the regional conventions. While the regional conventions facilitate recognition, mobility and inter-university cooperation within a region, the Global Convention does this between regions.
Developing a shared sense of quality and standards

Quality assurance (QA), qualification recognition and accreditation of institutions and programmes are related concepts, but across the world, there are different meanings and understandings of these terms. The first evaluation agencies emerged in the US more than a century ago, as growing demand for HED and a range of private providers raised questions about quality of provision. In Europe, the UK was the first to introduce external quality assurance in the 1960s. In tandem with the growth of higher education globally, there are now more than 150 different national and professional quality assurance agencies working across the world. Some have drawn on colonial legacies and influences on export and transplant their models. They work in diverse systems and ways, and they too need oversight and scrutiny. Their success lies in their focus on detail, and in anticipating the specific challenges facing national HED systems. There is a tension between their use by national governments to support reform agendas, and their role in promoting and enhancing the quality (QE) of provision internationally. Not every country has robust expectations of internal quality assurance (IQA) at the programme and institutional level: these processes are time-consuming and challenging and need adequate resourcing. The rise of commercial cross-border provision, generating (and responding to) student mobility has presented additional dilemmas and challenges (Rosa et al., 2016; Hartmann, 2021).

UNESCO’s recognition work has been key to the integration—despite structural inequality and coloniality—of the global HED regime (Hartmann, 2007; 2010; Zapp and Ramirez, 2019). UNESCO was involved in fostering regional networks of agencies and in establishing INQAAHE (International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in HE) in 1991. INQAAHE plays an important global convening role, bringing QA agencies and different regional QA networks (e.g., ENQA, AQAN, APEAN) together under one umbrella. The network helps build collaborations and specialist networks, promotes research, establishes good practice and agrees shared standards (Karakhanyan and Stensaker, 2020). Respecting INQAAHE’s autonomy, UNESCO continues to support this network. At a time when data-driven global rankings have become an influential and powerful proxy of quality, quality assurance processes have to continue to evolve and respond. Countries have different regulatory structures, understandings of ‘quality’ and institutional expectations and understandings. Local approaches to internal and external quality assurance, are shaped by these national contexts, and this diversity has to be respected. Qualifications are composed of many elements, of which quality assurance is just one aspect. There is growing awareness of the coloniality of quality assurance regimes and the risks of implementing US/Northern approaches in the majority world (Blanco, 2014; 2015). There is also a quality assurance ‘gap’ when the receiving/host countries do not have a quality assurance process or qualification framework in place.
In some parts of the world there is also a marked shortage of inter-regional initiatives to facilitate academic mobility. Inadequate mechanisms for recognising professional degrees (engineering, health, etc.) can lead to skills mismatch when graduate students return to their home countries to seek employment. The increasing complexity and scale of international student mobility has implications for existing conventions and quality assurance processes. With the increasing complexity and quantity of provision, converging approaches to quality assurance (QA) are key to facilitating the recognition of degrees. QA can act as a form of ‘soft regulation’, promoting mobility and harmonization.

The lack of shared cross-border quality benchmarks hinders regional convergence and recognition. This is exacerbated when national recognition centres are tasked with accrediting cross border provision. There are increasing examples of quality assurance bodies and recognition agencies working together. Examples include the overlapping work of the ENIC-NARIC network in Europe (European Network of Information Centres - National Academic Recognition Information Centres), or toolkits to help QA agencies work more closely together (Trifiro, 2018). Shared understandings of the two processes and their relationship is key to promoting collaborations between the quality assurance and qualification recognition communities. Trust is also key to cooperation. Commercial accreditation agencies are increasingly influential, especially where they are seeking to address existing QA gaps and to offer tools and solutions to help universities and providers who seek to offer cross-border qualifications (Hartmann, 2021). National governments will need to develop clear policy guidelines to oversee, support and regulate such initiatives.
In different ways and at different speeds, the world’s regions are gradually developing cross-border credit systems and qualification frameworks. At best, collaborations between national information centres (NICS) and quality assurance communities enable convergence and harmonization of standards (Trifiro, 2019).

The implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention by more than 50 European states has benefited from the Bologna process and the associated reforms that underpin the European Higher Education area (EHEA). There are a number of different drivers, levers and mechanisms operating in the EHEA to achieve regional integration – including at the political, legal, regulatory, policy and administrative levels. Its success partly depends on the quality assurance process along with the willingness of governments to work towards converging their HED systems. The Lisbon Recognition Convention contributes to the quality of HE, increasing mobility within Europe and attracting students, as well as European university collaborations. Bischof (2016) describes the challenge of measuring the extent of cross-border provision within Europe, with the European Services Directive placing the responsibility of regulation on the ‘exporting’ country. With the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, Europe has also been the first region to develop a mechanism providing an opportunity for refugees and those seeking asylum to have their qualifications assessed even when these cannot be fully documented (Bergan and Skjerven, 2019).

The ASEAN region differs from Europe in the extent of its cooperation and ‘harmonization’. Currently the largest and fastest growing HED sector in the world, the policy focus is on information provision and exchange to increase transparency and understanding of education systems, the continuum of effective quality assurance, and digitalization. Like its European counterpart, the Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centres (APPNIC) enables networking across the region.

Within the ASEAN region, Australia and New Zealand have led the development of the first functional regional qualifications framework, the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF). This has triggered systemic education and training reforms across ASEAN Member States, including the development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks. The AQRF provides a regional benchmark to facilitate comparisons of national qualifications frameworks across ASEAN Member States. The ‘referencing’ process promotes understanding and transparency of ASEAN qualifications, including credit transfer arrangements. Australia has also developed a Quality Assurance of Online Learning Toolkit that can be used by any country regardless of experience in recognition of the need for practitioner level guidance for policy makers, regulators, quality assurance bodies and qualifications recognition authorities.

Other regions face their own quality challenges, especially in assuring the quality of new private providers and meeting the needs of growing numbers of students in under-resourced HED systems. Africa has very different regional quality assurance systems, shaped by the colonial legacies of Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone HED systems, creating extra constraints on pan-African academic mobility. The activities of HAQAA (Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation) include working towards a pan-African qualifications framework, along with a continent-wide QA and accreditation framework.
Promoting collaboration between QA and qualification recognition communities requires developing shared understandings of the two processes, their differences and their relationship. Converging practices of quality assurance and recognition require harmonization (developing shared references frameworks), compatibility (reducing the challenge of what the Global Convention calls ‘substantial differences’), comparability (clear equivalency arrangements), and transparency. Wells (2014) identifies an emerging quality ‘DNA’ as enabling this convergence.

The 2019 UNESCO Global Convention presents the quality assurance community with new challenges. Building on the regional conventions, it is the next step in promoting ‘fair, open and transparent’ international quality assurance, making trust the key currency that sustains this process. It tasks agencies to consider formal, non-formal and informal education as a whole, the recognition of micro-credentials, making specific provision for non-traditional modes of learning. It recognises the importance of quality and recognition dialogues at a global level, without imposing a single dominant QA regime. Transparent sharing of information at every level is essential to the future of a global HED community.

4.3. Assuring the quality of CBHE in support of mobility

Innovations in CBHED provision pose new challenges for quality assurance and recognition processes. Examples include dual and joint degrees, ‘stackable’ degrees, twinning arrangements, micro-credentials and new forms of online distance-learning. Solutions include international networking and sharing between national information centres (NICS), such as ENIC-NARIC in Europe or the Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centres (APNNIC), new approaches to TNE benchmarking, the importance of open access to information, and ensuring the UNESCO conventions support the evolution of quality assurance practices. Rosa et al (2016) explore the challenges of assuring the quality of commercial provision, showing how different European states adopt their own approaches to regulating outgoing CBHE. Hartmann (2021) highlights the importance of the successive conventions. Contributors to Karakhanyan and Stensaker (2020) describe different national configurations and approaches to quality assurance, and the way that ‘relevance’, efficiency and legitimacy are interpreted in different regions. The activities of commercial accreditation agencies that are not closely overseen by national regulatory bodies, or whose work does not conform to international best practice, pose governance challenges for the sector. INQAAHE does not hold any supranational authority over these agencies.
05. Policy recommendations
These policy recommendations from the three focus groups are based on an integrative understanding of academic mobilities, recognising that students, researchers, institutions, and ideas move across borders in increasingly diverse and complex ways. The equity and sustainability of these different academic mobilities requires policy oversight, regulation and quality assurance.

**Student mobility**

- Universities will need to offer hybrid combinations of physical and virtual student mobility - including distance learning, flexible and ‘stackable’ qualifications – to meet the continuing demand for global HE, whilst remaining committed to widening participation.

- As the population of mobile students diversifies socially, governments and HED providers need to assure the quality of all provision (virtual and physical), avoiding a vertical stratification of mobility opportunities that reinforces social differences.

- National HED access and widening participation initiatives cannot ignore the global dimensions of inequity. Where possible national policies need to consider the international dimension, and international students need to be involved in national initiatives to improve equity, diversity, teaching quality etc.

- The climate crisis cannot be ignored. It poses important questions, given the likely future growth in physical student mobility, for the future sustainability of the sector. Policy will need to find ways to mitigate the impact of aero-mobility – e.g., through promoting regionalization, incentivising land travel, and, where possible, seeking to reduce international flights.

- New hybrids of physical and virtual mobility are made possible through high quality CBHE, but commercially oriented provision in this space will need to be carefully regulated.

- Universities need integrated, sustainable and comprehensive internationalization strategies that prioritise quality and equity, make effective use of online provision, and prioritise sustainability. They will need to work with governments to limit supply-side constraints, such as visa restrictions and migration controls.

- Increasing geopolitical tensions create growing uncertainties for the sector. Promoting hybrid mobilities offers flexibility to both universities and students. The aim should be a range of accessible and appropriate learning environments for students, minimising the stratification of provision and the risks of digital exclusion and inequity.
**Researcher mobility**

- HED policy should seek to promote sustainable researcher mobility. Funding for two-way academic mobility exchange programmes helps facilitate the exchange of ideas (provided flying is limited where possible). The success of international networking and exchanges should not be measured by an instrumental assessment of research outputs.

- Doctoral training programmes should seek to promote new creative and hybrid models of researcher mobility, fostering virtual training collaborations (e.g., through online doctoral workshops and distance supervision), south-south links and regional postgraduate hubs.

- The global research system needs to attend to the human dimensions of physical mobility. This means providing support to those with caring and family responsibilities, fostering more inclusive and equal research training cultures (including support for emotional wellbeing), and providing support for readjustment for researchers returning ‘home’.

- Open Science initiatives offer the opportunity to rethink how research gets disseminated, circulated and published. Open (Online) conferences can facilitate the circulation of ideas without requiring physical mobility. Funding will need to support academic journals and research platforms that are international in scope but also support regional knowledge ecosystems.

- Strengthening research capacity and research funding in countries across the global South can counter academic dependency and epistemic coloniality, especially in the social sciences and humanities.

**Quality assurance**

- The growing complexity of TNE provision has many implications for existing regulatory and accreditation processes. A strong national QA and regulatory framework is key to supporting autonomy in the face of global QA ‘regimes’, as well as fostering regional collaborations and the ratification of UNESCO’s Global Convention and ‘second generation’ regional conventions.

- UNESCO should update its 2006 and 2007 guidelines and codes on CBHE and transnational education. A revised set of recommendations and ‘best practice’ guidelines will act as a useful global reference document for a range of QA and recognition stakeholders, guiding the development of regional guidelines.

- Four key principles should guide the implementation of quality assurance and recognition processes: harmonization (through common QA reference frameworks where possible), compatibility (reducing substantial differences), comparability (setting up equivalency arrangements), and transparency (including the sharing of information between National Information Centres (NICs)). Each context will be different, and these processes take time: trust between all parties is key.

- The UNESCO Global Convention covers formal, non-formal and informal education, and this presents new challenges e.g., how to operationalize the recognition of micro-credentials. Close collaboration between QA and qualification recognition communities is key to developing solutions.
Web resources and visualizations of international student mobility

UNESCO UIS

IIE Project Atlas

OECD Education at a glance

Nous Group for Navitas and the Australian Government
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Organized by UNESCO in collaboration with the Government of Spain, the 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022) aims at breaking away from the traditional models of higher education and opening doors to new, innovative, creative, and visionary conceptions that not only serve current agendas for sustainable development, but also pave the way for future learning communities that overcome barriers, speak to all and are inclusive of all lifelong learners.

The WHEC2022 promotes a global conversation nurtured by diverse narratives on higher education through various activities: generation and dissemination of knowledge; formulation of updated policy recommendations; identification and sharing of innovative practices; networking and strengthening of partnerships; broad participation of stakeholders at local and international levels (within and outside higher education systems: professors, researchers, youth, managers, authorities, policy makers, experts, entrepreneurs, social leaders, etc.); and development of renewed paths framed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and looking at the Futures of Education.

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