

**Social Inclusiveness, Development and Student Mobility  
in International Higher Education:  
The Case of the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program**

Joan Dassin, Jürgen Enders and Andrea Kottmann

## Introduction

It is widely accepted that internationalization is transforming the nature of higher education. The ICT revolution has irreversibly connected higher education institutions and systems throughout the world. Global student flows have increased more than fourfold over the past 30 years (OECD, 2012). Cross-border networks, partnerships, projects and new types of institutional arrangements, such as branch campuses, are flourishing. Global studies courses, collaborative research, increased numbers of foreign students and scholars, as well as multiple other international contacts, now bring the outside world to even the most isolated domestic campus.

Scholars who study these trends recognize their benefits but also warn about their unanticipated consequences (Knight, 2012). Concerns revolve around maintaining academic quality in the face of unregulated expansion and privatization. Will encroaching commercialization and economic competition replace traditional values of academic cooperation? A faint nostalgia can be heard in the observation that global student mobility, still central to many internationalization policies, has changed from “simple student exchange” within “an incredibly small elite group” to a “mass phenomenon” driven by “the big business of recruitment” (Brandenburg and de Wit, 2011, p.16).

The debate over quantitative growth versus academic quality overshadows another key point in international student mobility: that international higher education is still a long way from being a truly open and global system. Expansion and diversification are not inherently democratizing trends. On the contrary, strong disparities in access and success continue to mark higher education systems at the national, regional and global levels.

This paper reviews some of these persistent inequalities in global student mobility. It presents the case of the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program (IFP), a pioneering effort to develop an equity-based scholarship model. IFP was a natural laboratory for testing whether a program intended to increase the participation and academic success of students who lack systematic access to higher education in their own developing countries could operate successfully in a wide variety of international settings and educational systems. IFP’s experience also offers insights into the relationship between educational opportunity and broader social justice outcomes in developing countries. Finally, IFP’s results suggest areas for further research and analysis that are central to contemporary studies in international and comparative education.

## **Persistent Inequalities in International Higher Education**

Streitwieser (2012) stresses the importance of understanding the impact of worldwide student mobility on “social and economic systems at a variety of levels, from the local and national to the regional and global” (p.1). One could also argue the reverse, namely the importance of studying the impact of social and economic systems at various levels on global student mobility. This supplementary perspective helps to account for the limitations in the number of foreign students as well as the types of people who participate in international education.

In most developing countries, the number of places in higher education is still highly restricted, and is rather small compared to advanced industrial countries. For example, despite nearly increasing by more than two percentage points in the preceding ten years, tertiary gross enrollment rates in sub-Saharan Africa stood at just 6.3% in 2009. In Latin America and the Caribbean—the highest performing developing regions—the rate in 2009 was 36%, as compared to rates in excess of 70% in the United States, Northern Europe, Russia, Australia and Japan (World Bank, 2012). Participation in national higher education systems is also highly stratified. Access is usually limited to elites who not only have financial resources but also benefit from privileged access to high quality education at the primary and secondary level. Rather than promoting social mobility, national education systems tend to reinforce existing social stratification, especially in countries with high levels of inequality.

Rapid growth of higher education does not necessarily lead to a more diverse participation. Among other factors, access to higher education is in particular stratified by gender, class, race, ethnicity, and rural vs. urban location. To overcome these disparities, many countries have implemented legal frameworks and targeted programs. Compensatory policies may help disadvantaged groups to participate in higher education but cannot completely offset structural inequalities in the short term. In Brazil, for example, nearly 45% of Brazilian higher education institutions have adopted affirmative action measures since 2003. By 2009, participation of blacks and mixed race people in higher education had increased by nearly 100% (Rosemberg, 2012), to 35.1% of the student population. Yet these groups, which constitute 51% of the Brazilian population still lag far behind whites, who make up 63.9% of higher education students (Rosemberg, 2012). Global student flows show rapid expansion but unequal participation as well. The number of foreign students enrolled in tertiary education increased from 0.8 million in 1975 to 4.1 million in 2010 (OECD, 2012). Yet student flows are still primarily from poorer to richer countries, with almost two-thirds of foreign students in the OECD area coming from outside OECD countries. Moreover, overall participation in international study is still low at the global level. Despite the unprecedented expansion in student mobility, only 1-3% of the student population typically participates in international study. The rate is higher in some of the Erasmus participating countries—a notable but rare exception (Steitwieser, 2012).

Participation in international student mobility is affected by low and inequitable participation rates in higher education at the regional and national level. Asian students comprise more than half of all international students. Students from Africa, in contrast, comprise only 12% of all international students enrolled in the OECD area. Only one African country, Nigeria, is among the top 25 sending countries to the United States (IIE, 2012).

Cost is a major deterrent to all but the most affluent students considering study abroad. International students pay higher tuition than domestic students in the major English-language study destinations such as the Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States (Beerkens, 2012). And although tuition rates continue to rise at U.S. universities, nearly two-thirds of international students must rely on personal and family funds to finance their studies. (IIE, 2012).

Social factors are also important, even within Europe, where 'non-traditional' students (e.g. coming from a family with a low level of educational attainment, part-timers, those over 30 years of age) are less likely to aspire to foreign study (Orr, 2012). There is no systematic body of scholarship on patterns of participation in international higher education from developing countries, much less from a comparative perspective. It is, however, highly likely, because of inhibiting socio-economic factors, that mobile students from the developing world who study in more economically advanced countries are "academically ambitious and/or come from relatively wealthy backgrounds" (Teichler, 2012, p.44).

Educational mobility, therefore, is still only for a selected few, and global student flows continue to be marked by regional and socio-economic disparities. The challenge of the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program (IFP) was to enable more diverse socio-economic groups from the global South to participate successfully in international higher education. This required a series of institutional and educational innovations, that will be discussed below.

### **The Case of the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program (IFP)**

IFP deliberately set out to test some key assumptions related to the principle established by the International Association of Universities, which declared that "international mobility, exchanges and cross-border education activities must integrate the twin goals of increased access and equitable participation" (IAU, 2008, p.1). First, the program had to recruit and select Fellows from marginalized groups with limited access to higher education, whether at home or abroad. Especially if the number of qualified candidates far exceeded the supply of fellowships, the program would have demonstrated that a significant demand for international study exists among these groups.

Second, the program had to create enabling conditions so that the Fellows, many of whom had significant gaps in their previous education, could gain access to and succeed academically in highly competitive academic programs at leading universities in different world regions. Further, the program had to demonstrate

that donor support for higher education, particularly scholarships for international study, would directly enhance the Fellows' capacity to contribute to development and social justice in their home countries and communities.

Above all, the program's success depended on mitigating 'brain drain' pressures and ensuring that the IFP Fellows, who come from vulnerable and excluded groups in some of the world's poorest countries, would draw on their new knowledge and global networks to address issues of poverty and underdevelopment at home. For IFP, the social justice outcomes needed to go beyond increasing access and equitable participation in international higher education through targeted fellowships. The longer-term question was whether educational opportunity would also lead to more sustainable development impacts.

### Processes and Outcomes

Between 2001 and 2010, IFP provided more than 4,300 scholarships for masters (82 percent of the Fellows) and doctoral degree study (18 percent of the Fellows). Recipients pursued studies in development-related fields in the arts and humanities, the social and behavioral sciences, and in environment, health and applied sciences. Selected from Russia and 21 countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, IFP Fellows enrolled in almost 650 universities in nearly 50 countries. Approximately two thirds studied internationally, and one third studied in their home countries and regions. By early 2013, nearly 4,000 Fellows had completed their fellowships. The remaining Fellows are expected to conclude their fellowships by the end of 2013.

**Figure 1: Selected IFP Fellows by Country**

#### Selected Fellows by Region



To operate effectively at the local, national, regional and global level, IFP created a multi-actor, multi-level system. At the apex was the International Fellowships Fund (IFF), created by the Ford Foundation to oversee the program. Based in New York, IFF hosted the IFP Secretariat, which developed the program's organizational structure and global policies. International Partner organizations (IPs) - technically sub-grantees based in the participating countries - adapted global policies to local conditions, devising strategies and implementing recruitment, selection, pre-academic training and monitoring of Fellows, as well as Alumni activities. International education organizations provided placement and monitoring services to Fellows based on their international study region.

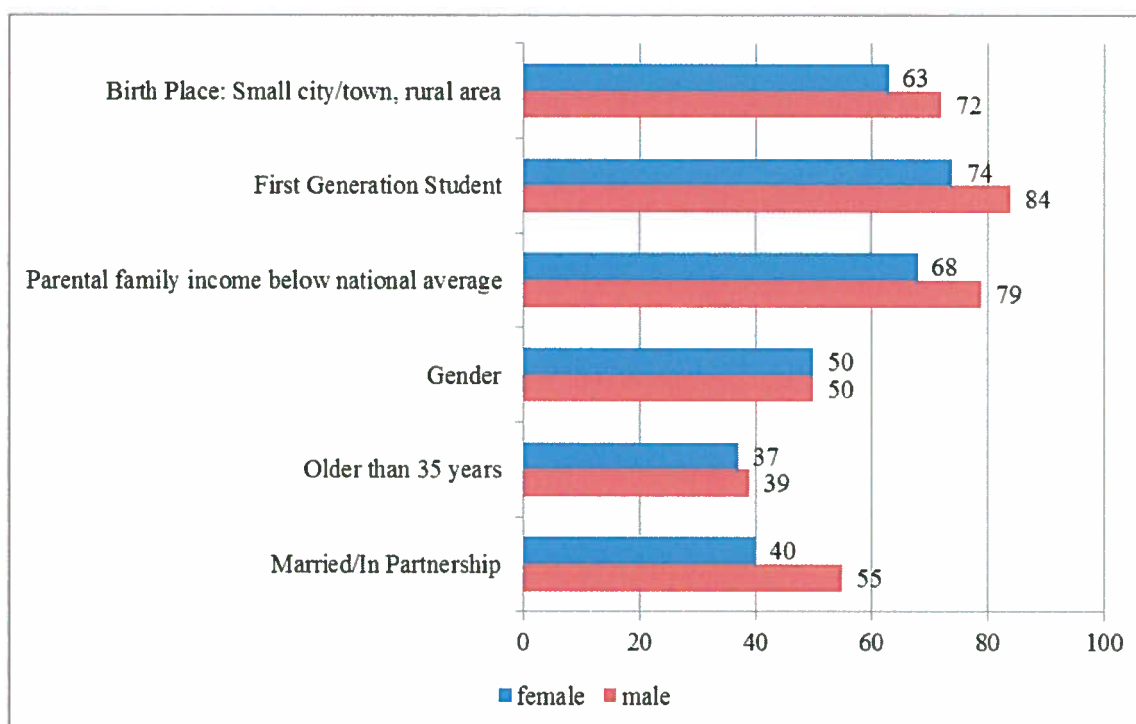
Decentralized service provision within a unitary global framework was the IFP hallmark. It was especially important - and novel for international fellowship programs - that Fellows were selected by local committees comprised of independent professionals, and not in New York by the IFP Secretariat.

Formative evaluation was central to the program design. In 2002, the program contacted the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) to develop and undertake a formative evaluation (Enders & de Boer, 2003). Using questionnaire-based surveys, interviews of Fellows, analyses of program documents and participation in various types of program meetings, the CHEPS study provided a steady flow of data and analysis. The information allowed IFP to assess its progress in achieving the program's principal goals on an ongoing basis, and to make adjustments as the program developed.

The IFP Secretariat and the IPs were also involved in continuous program assessment. Through grant reports, country-level studies, site visits and national, regional and global meetings, the individuals and organizations responsible for the program built a locally-based, internationally accessible 'learning system.' Collectively, the actors in this system developed strategies to address design challenges, implementation problems and policy issues faced by different actors at different stages of the fellowship cycle. As with the formative evaluation, information obtained on an ongoing basis was immediately cycled back into the program, facilitating modifications as needed.

The profile of the IFP selected finalists reveals that the program was successful in recruiting candidates from marginalized groups with limited access to higher education. This profile fits the program's stated goals. Indicators such as place of birth and current residence, parents' educational level and family income, and discrimination based on gender, race ethnicity and rural location were taken into account. As expected, results varied by individual country and region, due to different patterns of urbanization, levels of educational attainment and types of discrimination affecting marginalized groups.

**Figure 2: Socio-demographic and Socio-biographic Background of IFP Finalists**  
(Finalists 2003-2010, in %)



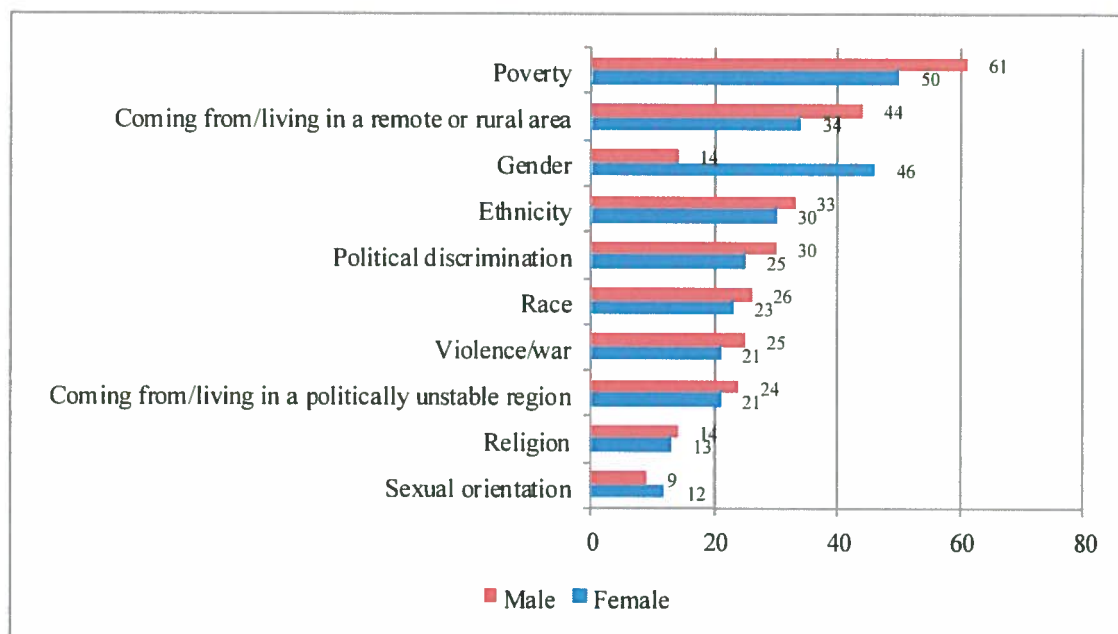
Source: Enders & Kottmann (2011).

Nonetheless, the data show significant convergence at the global level. For example, about two thirds of all selected finalists were born in small towns or rural areas. About 79% of the selected Finalists were first generation students, 45% of the Finalists' fathers and 57% of their mothers did not even progress beyond primary school. Over 70% reported their family income at below average, and more than half indicated that they had experienced social injustice to a high extent because of poverty. Gender, age and family responsibilities can also pose obstacles to further study. 50% of the IFP Fellows were women. Among all Fellows, 37% were older than 35 years of age at the time of selection, and nearly half were married, in a domestic partnership and/or had dependent children.

The program developed innovative academic support services for Fellows prior to and during their study period. One of the most effective services was pre-academic training: short- to medium-term courses designed to remedy gaps in the Fellows' preparation for graduate level study. Low levels of English proficiency were an especially serious obstacle for those who sought international placements, and nearly all Fellows required short-term training to develop the necessary computer skills. Local universities and private providers based in the Fellows' home countries administered courses in English and other languages, academic writing, research methodology, computer skills and other relevant subject areas. Fellows studied in small groups; instruction was often online. In some countries, entire cohorts of

Fellows gathered for more extended periods for residential courses held in a central location.

**Figure 3: Experiences of Social Injustice of IFP Finalists by Gender.**  
 (Finalists 2003-2010, in %; 4 and 5 on a scale from 1 'not at all' to 5 'to a high extent')



Source: IFP Finalists Survey 2003 - 2010, Author's own calculations

Over time, IFP established special relationships with approximately two dozen universities that hosted significant numbers of IFP Fellows. In many cases, these universities introduced more flexible admissions procedures, including conditional admissions, for Fellows who did not have the required language scores or whose transcripts showed inadequate undergraduate preparation in their chosen fields. About one third of IFP Fellows attended bridging programs at their host universities that gave them extra time to improve their skills and adapt to the new environment. Designed for IFP Fellows, these new approaches allowed the universities to provide improved services for international students in general, and became standard practice (Bigalke & Zurbuchen, 2013).

Proactive monitoring was another element of IFP's academic support system. In addition to academic advisors and host university personnel, the Fellows' home-based International Partners (IP) kept abreast of their academic progress. IFP policy required that each Fellow received prior approval from his or her IP in order to renew multi-year fellowships. In practice, this administrative requirement fostered a close personal relationship between Fellows and their home country partners. The Fellows' ongoing interaction with the IFP scholarship managers at home reinforced their sense of personal responsibility and mitigated 'brain drain' pressures.

The program's comprehensive approach to academic readiness and student support was highly successful. Working through the Institute of International Education, the British Council and the Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in Higher Education as well as its own International Partners, IFP successfully placed 97% of its Fellows in leading international universities in all major world regions, including the Fellows' home countries and regions. 98% of all Fellows placed in academic programs completed their fellowships, and the overall degree attainment rate of more than 3,300 IFP Alumni surveyed in early 2012 was nearly 91%.

IFP's longer-term goal was to enhance the Fellows' capacity to contribute to social justice and development in their home countries and communities. For this reason, Fellows were selected on the basis of social commitment and leadership capacity, as well as academic achievement and potential. Although the Fellows' contributions may take years to unfold, the early evidence, based on multiple Alumni surveys, individual interviews and case histories, as well as country-level studies, is very positive.

**Table 1: Current Residence of IFP Alumni, Current Main Activity, Leadership Positions, Impact on Social Justice**  
(Alumni Survey 2012, in %)

<i>Current Residence by Home Region</i>	Latin America	Africa	Asia/Russia	Total
Living in my Home country or community	84	79	83	82
Living in another country	16	21	17	18
<i>Current Main Activity by Home Region</i>	Latin America	Africa	Asia/Russia	Total
Employment and/or Academic Study	92	91	94	92
Other Main Activity	9	9	7	8
<i>Leadership Positions by Alumni Cohort</i>	Early Alumni	Intermediate Alumni	Recent Alumni	Total
Senior Management or Leadership Position	69	70	57	66
Current Position Related to Social Commitment	85	89	90	88
<i>Applying Knowledge and Evaluation of Impact by Alumni Cohort</i>	Early Alumni	Intermediate Alumni	Recent Alumni	Total
Applying Knowledge in Professional Activities*	87	83	83	84
General Evaluation of Impact**	82	82	84	83

Source: Enders & Kottmann (2012).

\*Answer categories 4 and 5 on a scale from 1 'strongly disagree/not at all' to 5 'strongly agree/to a very high extent'

\*\*Answer categories 4 and 5 on a scale from 1 'not at all strong' to 5 'very strong'

The first challenge in achieving IFP's longer-term goal was to avoid 'brain drain'. Just as international student mobility flows largely from poorer to richer countries, skilled labor also follows that pattern. Yet the vast majority of IFP Fellows



return home. In the 2012 survey, 82% of Alumni reported that they were living in their home community or country. This included 77% of Fellows who studied internationally, 89% who studied in their home region and 97% who studied in their home country.

The same survey showed that the over 90% of IFP Alumni were employed or continuing academic study. Nearly two thirds held senior management or leadership positions. Nearly 90% reported that their current position is related to their social commitment; 84% agreed or agreed strongly that they are applying their knowledge in their professional activities; and 83% were confident that they are having a strong or very strong impact on their home countries and communities.

From literally thousands of Alumni stories, just a few examples make clear how IFP Alumni are bringing new research, policy analysis, and professional skills to bear on persistent development challenges ([www.fordifp.org](http://www.fordifp.org), 2012). In Kenya, Alumni are designing and implementing urban and rural development projects, creating economic enterprises for youth and training farmers in new agricultural techniques. In India, former Fellows are providing revitalized leadership to local government and NGOs in remote regions by overcoming long standing social divisions based on class, caste and gender. In Mexico, Alumni from indigenous groups are bringing innovations in communications such as internet browsers and popular radio programming to their home communities, thus connecting them to contemporary society while preserving traditional languages and cultures. Complementing these individual achievements, IFP Alumni networks and associations—some now formally registered as independent NGOs—are also engaged in similar projects.

### **The IFP Experience: Implications for Research and Policy in International Education**

We said at the outset that IFP was a natural laboratory for challenging persistent inequalities in higher education at the regional and national level, and for exploring ways of supporting the inclusion of excluded groups into global student mobility. Program experiences and results suggest several issues for further research and analysis. This research, we argue, could have significant implications for policy makers at donor agencies, national governments and universities working at the intersection of social inclusiveness in higher education, global student mobility and development. Various issues emerge that are relevant to scholarship in the two distinct yet overlapping epistemic domains of international and comparative education (Streitwieser et. al., 2012).

The first issue is to gain better understanding of access and equity in global student mobility in international higher education in general and for developing countries in particular. IFP has proven that a targeted program can mobilize students from marginalized communities in developing countries for participation in high quality international higher education. Without such intervention, deep structural inequalities at home might, however, limit access to international higher

education in ways that simply reproduce persistent inequalities in educational opportunities or might even create new inequalities for participation in a globalizing world. There is thus a need for further systematic national and cross-national comparative research into socio-economic backgrounds and characteristics of international students.

The second and related issue focuses on the demand and potential for international study among groups from developing countries that lack systematic access to higher education in their own country. IFP received nearly 80,000 applications over ten years. The large candidate pool allowed IFP to be highly selective; only 5% of the total applicants were awarded fellowships. Thousands more would have been qualified for support, even for highly competitive graduate level programs. Better information on potential students from marginalized groups would help policy makers to extend opportunities for international education in ways that address deep structural inequalities at home.

The third issue for further research focuses on educational services and institutional changes that can support international (or domestic) students from marginalized groups. IFP demonstrated that with needs-based academic preparation and close monitoring, its Fellows could overcome substantial educational deficits and succeed in a wide variety of higher education institutions. This result counters the concern that social inclusion 'lowers academic standards' in highly competitive graduate level programs. Universities can do their part by instituting flexible admissions policies, including conditional admissions, bridging programs and academic counseling.

Beyond academic support, universities also need to offer readily available services for students to resolve practical, cultural, and health issues, which can be especially challenging for students lacking international experience and financial resources. These services may require new organizational structures and personnel, possibly at an additional cost. The relevant question, then, is what incentives exist for universities and other educational organizations to create more 'socially inclusive' policies and services. Further research is thus needed on the costs and benefits for institutions that not only increase but also diversify their international student populations.

Finally, recent years have seen more emphasis on 'value for money' in development assistance. Many donor countries, especially in Northern Europe, as well as Australia, Canada, Japan and the United States, provide individual scholarships to students from developing countries as part of their foreign assistance programs. Emerging countries such as China and Brazil are also starting to offer scholarships to foreign students, although their emphasis remains on sending domestic students abroad. Yet donor governments or implementing agencies may find it difficult to demonstrate that scholarships help to achieve broader foreign assistance goals like improving health and livelihoods in poor countries. The primary challenge is attributing social change directly to individual studies supported by a scholarship.

The IFP experience has shown that incorporating a formative evaluation into program design from the outset may help to address this challenge. In the case of IFP, the formative evaluation has proven to be very useful in gathering robust, large scale, global data on program effects on the recipients and in providing ongoing feedback into the policy learning of the program. Data collected over nearly ten years show that IFP largely achieved its short term goals: the program identified and recruited thousands of qualified candidates from designated target groups; nearly all the Fellows have had successful academic results in hundreds of universities in dozens of countries; and the vast majority of Alumni are advancing into influential positions where they exercise recognized leadership on social justice issues. Many Alumni are involved in policy making at the local, national and even international level, while others are engaged in research and advocacy.

An emerging literature on impact analysis suggests further improvements of such a formative evaluation approach, e.g. gaining insights into program effects on recipients by tracing trajectories of a control group of non-recipients (see, for example, Creed et al., 2012) and related micro-methods in evaluating policy interventions in development aid (Garcia, 2011).

For the long term, however, it will be very important to test the validity of IFP's ideas about higher education and social change in a variety of settings. Many questions could be asked. To what extent does educational opportunity, especially for international study at the graduate level, have a lasting effect in reversing discrimination and stigmatization? How does the personal empowerment that comes with advanced education translate into gains for the broader community in the long run? Is it possible to identify situations where economic, social and political constraints severely limit the kinds of transformational leadership that individuals or their communities can exercise, as opposed to more fluid contexts where change is truly possible? Clearly, these questions go beyond conventional research on study abroad, student mobility, and international student exchange. Instead, they highlight the complex relationships between education and society in a globalizing world, one of the major purposes for contemporary studies in comparative education (Whalen, 2012).

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