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ISM Policy Pervasion: Visas, Study Permits, and the International Student Experience

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ABSTRACT

With more and more literature on international student mobility and migration (ISM), one area of focus has often been overlooked: the impacts of student visas and study permits. Examined through an institutionalist framework highlighting the influences of institutions on individuals and their agency, this study describes how visa and study permit policies pervades international students' lives in a variety of ways. Interview data collected from 40 international students who study in Australia, Canada, and the United States were analyzed to uncover themes from these host countries. Drawing on these interviews to outline the concept of ISM policy pervasion, the findings of this study show that visa policies affect international students in wide ranging ways. In addition to providing empirical evidence for ISM policy pervasion, this article also lays the groundwork for further studies that delve into the practical impacts of student visa and study permit policies around the world.

Keywords: International students; international student mobility and migration; immigration policy; international student experience; visas; study permits.

It is likely not novel or surprising to assert that student visa rules and regulations affect international students in highly personal ways. For example, visas may have restrictive enrollment minima, which creates course load pressures that affect the student's mental health. Yet, while this and many other examples may be common occurrences and their impacts familiar to international students and those who work with them, there is little scholarship on the ways in which international student mobility and migration (ISM) policies affect students, which leaves our understanding of the topic very much based on anecdotal evidence and personal experiences.

The growing internationalization of higher education is accompanied by expanding numbers of mobile students attending institutions in an increasingly large number of countries across the world (Mason, 2021; Rumbley et al., 2012; Shields, 2013). According to the US Institute for International Education (IIE), global student mobility rose from 2.2 million students in 1998 to more than 5.6 million in 2018 (Mason, 2021). Concomitant with the growing movement of students and scholars across national borders is the development of student-specific immigration policies to control these flows.

Such diverse visa and study permit policies, which are referred to here broadly as ISM policies, delineate not only the criteria for students to gain entry through nations' borders to pursue an education, but they also outline requirements to which students must adhere while in the country as students. As such, ISM policy incorporates ideas from Hammar's (1985) explanation of both "immigration regulation" and "immigrant policy" (pp. 7-9), where the former indicates entry criteria, and the latter regulates requirements for those within the country. Thus, my use of the term ISM policy describes this combination of (i) regulatory arrangements prescribing border ingress to study and (ii) in-country regulations for the duration of the degree program studies. With increases in international student numbers, greater numbers of students are likely facing the impacts of ISM policy as they seek educational opportunities outside of their home countries.

Empirical study of the lived experiences of international students in their interactions with the host nation's ISM policy provides an avenue towards better understanding what Robertson (2013) calls the "intersection of the realms of the personal and the political" (p. 88). The lived experiences of international students' interactions with the host nation and its policies is an area that deserves greater scholarly attention as it is an unfortunately understudied topic, and this study seeks to address this gap in the literature through a qualitative study that responds to calls for more examination of "the politics of the international student experience" (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017, p. iv).

This is important for several reasons. First, it is understood that "macro-level policies shape the everyday lives of international students" (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017, p. iv), however, the concrete ways this occurs is not well known. Second, this study's approach provides an opportunity to explore how ISM policies pervade students' lives in three different countries with varied policy approaches, paving the way for understanding how these sorts of impacts may obtain in other national and policy contexts. Third, the study may provide a first pass at understanding the wide range of policy impacts on international students in order to inform larger-scale quantitative or mixed-methods studies to continue exploring these impacts in greater depth by incorporating the voices of more international students from these and other countries. Finally, the scant literature on student ISM policies (Grimm, 2019) seldom centers on student voices and experiences. According to Gargano (2009), policy change should consider "the voices of students who engage in educational sojourns and who are impacted by these very policies" (pp. 332-333).

Unfortunately, there remain relatively few studies in this vein. I begin with an overview of the literature on international students, underlining the dearth of literature focusing on the micro-level (i.e., individual) impacts of visa and study permit policies in host countries. contrasted with the macro (national) level that is more often the subject of research on ISM policy. I then provide a brief overview of institutionalism as a theoretical framework for the conduct of this study, before providing an exploration of the methods used to conduct the study, including a statement on positionality. This leads to the findings, which introduce how ISM policy impacts international students in relation to their academics, employment, relationships, and more. To conclude, this article outlines the concept of policy pervasion, its utility in the field of ISM studies, and how future research may build upon this empirical study and the rendering of ISM policy pervasion as a crucial concept within the field.

BACKGROUND

The student visa is self-evidently married to the purpose of facilitating access to academic and learning opportunities in the host country (Arenas, 2021; Brunner, 2022b), and examples abound of literature focusing on international student learning and academic performance in higher education. These might discuss the efficacy of the flipped classroom for teaching international students (Öznacar et al., 2019), academic services for supporting students (Martirosyan et al, 2019), new frameworks for “teaching, learning, and engagement for international students” (Tran, 2020), and much more. A published comprehensive review of literature from 2000 to 2019 focusing on challenges faced by international students primarily discusses visas in the context of pre-sojourn and post-graduation contexts (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019), reflecting a general deficit of literature focusing on the importance of visa impacts during the student’s time studying in the host country, including on students’ academic and learning experiences while abroad.

Elfeel & Bailey (2020) describe how being on a dependent visa associated with an international student in the United States (e.g., on an F-2 visa) sets individuals up with strict limitations on their learning, since study is prohibited with this particular status, though the F-2 visa is explicitly not a student visa (Elfeel & Bailey, 2020). Grimm (2019), citing Miano (2017), notes that visa policies outlining Optional Practical Training (OPT) for international students in the United States are “intended to serve as a practical complement to their academic studies” (p. 240), identifying how that policy has been oriented to contribute to student learning. Engaging with complications arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, some research has noted how visas in Canada (Brunner, 2022a) and in the United States (Crumley-Effinger, 2021) place restrictions on learning modality options, limiting the number of courses that students can take through online learning. Other studies of ISM policy responses to the pandemic sometimes noted visa-related actions or changes (Buckner et al., 2022; Lynch et al., 2023).

Importantly, though, with the exception of Lynch et al. (2023) and Grimm & Day (2022), such studies normally do not touch on the personal effects of these regulations.

A number of resources discuss the intersections of visa policies and employment topics, often focusing on post-graduation employment (Glass et al., 2021; Grimm, 2019; Tran et al., 2020), while a more limited selection of studies focus on student employment prior to program completion (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Clibborn, 2021). Clibborn's (2021) study of underpayment of international students in Australia shows that concern for exploitation is warranted. This work highlighted how international students are subject to "multiple vulnerabilities common to many temporary migrants" and that this can make them vulnerable to employment options that may deprive them of institutionalized labor protections (Clibborn, 2021, p. 350). Additionally, working hours limitations may limit students' employment options, as can a "lack of understanding of employment processes" in the host country (Arkoudis et al., 2019, p. 803).

Lipura & Collins (2020) noted the influences of romantic relationships on international students' activities but did not focus on any potential ways that the relationships were impacted by visa policies themselves. Discussing student-switchers in Australia, Robertson (2013) identified an immigration environment in which students' "bodies, capabilities, relationships and bank accounts [were] laid bare to the scrutiny of the immigration regime" (p. 8). Some ISM scholarship has similarly noted the surveillance of international students in the United States and in Canada (Brunner, 2022c; Crumley-Effinger, 2022; Allen & Bista, 2022). Highlighting the changeable nature of visa policies, Robertson (2013) showed how student attempts to transition from one status to another was accompanied by frustrations stemming from the fact that "government criteria for immigration could change during the course of their study" (p. 2).

The ways that visa policies affect student relationships are seldom noted in the literature. Byrne (2016) describes the soft power aims of Australian mobility policy of the New Colombo Plan: By bringing in international students from the region, the "underpinning expectation is that the cumulative insights, experiences, and friendships generated... will provide new and enduring pathways to mutual understanding, respect, trust, and collaboration between states" (p. 108). Troubling this sort of effort, some studies discuss a "social fragmentation" in relation to domestic and international students, with only a small percentage of international students making friends with domestic students (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Martirosyan et al., 2019). Another study showed that work opportunities offered through the Australian visa policies facilitated the development of new friendships with coworkers, especially other international students in the same place of employment (Tran et al., 2020).

Multi-step migration is often discussed in the literature. Grimm (2019) presents an Australian scheme to introduce a new visa category that "effectively allowed international graduates to 'switch' their immigration

status from that of a student to that of skilled migrant” (p. 246). This is noted as a “two-step” migration process (Grimm, 2019), or as “edugration” (Brunner, 2022b), with such approaches described as “nexus policies” in countries attracting large numbers of international students (Robertson, 2013). Ultimately, policies facilitating this sort of movement are building “education pathways as a means to residency” (Robertson, 2011, p. 110) and otherwise facilitate the pursuit of personal and familial “migration intentions” with students’ academic pursuits as the starting point (Glass et al., 2021, p. 14).

Though the above examples illustrate some of the ways that visa policies can influence student lives, the literature often notes such influences in passing, while studies explicitly focusing on student interactions with the state and the personal impacts of ISM policy are quite rare (Grimm, 2019; Brunner, 2022b). It is in response to this gap in the literature that this study is positioned to contribute a better understanding of the ways that ISM policies affect international students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Institutionalism draws from sociological traditions emphasizing the important influence on individuals of “cultural meanings and organizational forms” from the local environment (Meyer, 2006, p. xi). Both formal and informal meanings and forms provide a basis for developing conceptual ‘institutions,’ which serve as formal and informal models, norms, complexity reduction mechanisms, and cultural legitimation tools within their specific context (Meyer, 2006). As opposed to discrete organizations such as a company or a university, institutions are “more cultural than structural” (Wiseman & Baker, 2006, p. 4); they are, therefore, not necessarily visible, and they may be understood as commonly held and accepted norms of what is, for example, ‘real,’ ‘normal,’ or ‘acceptable.’

According to Kouba (2019), “Institutions are viewed as constraints that structure political, economic, and social interaction” (p. 4), enforcing an influence on the individuals within them. Such an influence implicitly highlights the power that can be present in institutions such as those related to immigration processes (Wiseman et al., 2014). In the context of this study, institutionalism provides a foundational understanding of the ways in which individuals are affected by social institutions, such as common border access norms, as institutionalized and made actionable through ISM policies in countries around the world. That is, at the national level, visa policies are indicative of a local social and political institution that places bounds on the international student experience, or part of a “migration infrastructure” (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). In short, social institutions may “both constrain and facilitate behavior/actions by societal/group members” (Martin, 2004). This study therefore examines the effects of a specific social institution (i.e., national ISM policy) on the experiences of international students.

METHODS

This study was guided by the research question: How do ISM policies affect international students? Data collection occurred through internet-mediated research (IMR) to conduct interviews with 40 current and former international students from Australia, Canada, and the United States. These countries were selected for a larger study based on language of instruction, language of policy documents, numbers of international students, and more. Semi-structured interviews (SSI) were used to collect comparable data from disparate interviews through an interview protocol, while allowing the interviewer to follow new emergent issues or themes that arose from the interviewees' responses (McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Qu & Dumay, 2011). The creation of the interview questions was guided by the theoretical framework outlined above to orient the study's approach to discerning student experiences.

In part due to the assumed geographic diversity of this interview data collection project, all interviews were conducted through synchronous online video conferencing software (Zoom). IMR interview methods of this study were developed and approved in late 2019 and early 2020, respectively, for ease of access to participants and for environmental reasons (Salmons, 2015; Crumley-Effinger et al., 2021), though, the COVID-19 pandemic made IMR research a near necessity. All interviews were recorded for subsequent transcription and data analysis, and informed consent forms were collected using a Qualtrics-based form approved by the IRB committee at Loyola University Chicago.

Recruitment of study participants through convenience sampling occurred in 2001 through LinkedIn and Facebook and with targeted outreach to international student support offices in the three host countries. For the purposes of this study, international students are defined as (and participants were drawn from) those who are or were: (1) enrolled in a higher education degree program (i.e., "diploma mobility" [Banks & Bhandari, 2012]); (2) not citizens or residents of the host nation (Lomer, 2018); and (3) permitted to engage in their study program by virtue of having procured a student-specific visa or study permit. Participants are listed in Table 1.

Qualitative content analysis was undertaken with NVivo and a coding and analysis protocol to systematize the analysis process utilizing a series of analytical queries (AQs), which were used to facilitate theory-based analysis. Emergent themes were pursued through open exploration of the student responses to the interview questions, without deliberate emphasis on any particular topic or theoretical grounds in order to remain open to experiences of the student without confinement to theoretical silos or prior research.¹

All participant names are pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity of research participants and the following section refers to and utilizes quotes, passages, and experiences from the student interview transcripts, where attribution to individual students is noted to include their pseudonym, reported nationality, and host nation

¹ Examples of the coding and analysis protocol's AQs may be requested by contacting the author.

code.² Engaging with the students in this study requires sensitivity as I take on the role of researcher, including acknowledgement and deliberate consideration regarding the ways in which my subjectivities and prior experiences relate to the topic and the experiences of the participants (St. Louis & Barton, 2002). It is possible that my previous experiences and scholarly endeavors could shape my understanding of the study topic as well as assumptions or informal hypotheses of what the study’s findings may show (Merriam et al., 2001).

Table 1: Study Participants

Pseudonym	Host Country	Nationality	Gender	Field of Study
Binsa	AU	Nepal	F	Nursing
Eddy	AU	Britain	M	Sociology
Ekani	AU	Singapore	F	Psychology
Hachi	AU	Taiwan	F	Social Work
Niraj	AU	Nepal	M	Data Science
Olivia	AU	Italy	F	Psychological Science
Qiaohui	AU	China	F	Physiotherapy
Ziqi	AU	China	F	Secondary Education
Aadi	CA	Bangladesh	M	Design
Afra	CA	Iran	F	Computer Science
Andrew	CA	USA	No response	Biology
Ella	CA	France	F	Political Science
Emily	CA	France	F	Biology
Howard	CA	USA	Genderqueer	History
Marion	CA	Germany	F	International Studies
Negar	CA	Iran	F	Urban Studies
Nisha	CA	India	F	Business
Noha	CA	USA / France	Nonbinary	Political Science
Pierre	CA	France	M	Biology
Andres	US	Colombia	M	Engineering
Benesh	US	Afghanistan	F	Human Rights
Bernd	US	Germany	M	History
Brenda	US	Mexico	F	Peace Studies
Chesa	US	Tibet	F	Neuroscience
Dee	US	China	F	Chemistry
Dhonu	US	Nepal	M	Computer Science
Jenni	US	China	F	Math
Juana	US	Argentina	F	Education Policy
Krishna	US	Nepal	M	Geology

² AU is the code for Australia; CA is for Canada; US is for the United States.

Linda	US	Paraguay / Italy	F	Marketing
Merve	US	Turkey	F	Sociology
Mia	US	Vietnam	F	Biochemistry
Octavio	US	Mexico	M	Biochemistry
Pia	US	Germany	F	Environmental Studies
Ray	US	India	M	Finance
Suz	US	Romania	F	Politics & International Relations
Vanya	US	Swaziland	F	Environmental Science & Sustainability
Vera	US	Ecuador	F	Environmental Policy
Vi	US	Vietnam	F	Math
Zoya	US	Pakistan	F	Education Policy

As the sole researcher and a current immigration advisor, I believe that my familiarity with the systems in the United States can enhance my understanding of some areas of the student experience. However, I sought to balance this with the possibility that I might be inclined to make assumptions about the way things may be in Australia and Canada based on my experiences in the United States. I hope to prevent undue effects of this positionality through my communication with students, showing my care for their situation and my genuine interest in hearing about their experiences in my efforts to utilize this study to shed light on their lived experiences as international students.

This study faced a number of limitations. First, my selection of only three host countries excludes the majority of potential host nations. Second, I relied on English language literature to inform my understanding of the vast scope of the field of ISM studies, meaning there are bodies of literature to which I had neither physical or digital access to the materials, nor linguistic access to the knowledge and findings contained within them. Third, because this study relied on convenience sampling to secure study participants, any number of factors from students' backgrounds and ISM policy experiences may have led them to participate in the study, leading to a non-representative sample of international students. Student experiences with ISM policy, from the more benign to traumatic and all that may lay in between, indicate that despite this sampling method, students came with broadly varying ISM policy experiences. Finally, individuals familiar with the ISM policy environments in all or some of the case countries may have noted incorrect or simplified statements from students about the ISM policies in their host countries. So, it is crucial to understand that the reported policy experiences are the students' perceptions, even if the rules and regulations are not correctly perceived or interpreted by the students.

FINDINGS

The findings show that visa policies impact students before, during, and after their sojourns abroad in diverse ways. First, students describe how the visa policies affect their academic experiences and decisions. Second, the interview data show that students' employment and professional decisions and trajectories are impacted by visa policies that delimit work opportunities in their host country during and after their periods of study. Third, ISM policy imprints are evident in students' relationships as they navigate policy requirements, restrictions, and uncertainties. Finally, the students' reflections during the interviews identified a select number of additional, supplemental impact topics to round out a full response to the research question. The different ISM policy impacts are summarized in Table 2, with select topics explored in detail below.

Table 2: Key Themes

Academics	Employment
Enrollment status	Getting hired
Time constraints	Hours limitations
Academics and employment	Gaining experience
Field of study	Future work and immigration status
Future plans	Exploitation
Academic performance	Employer relationships
Stress	Earnings and income
Relationships	Supplemental
Non-issues	Student switching
Family	Knowledge of policies
Romantic	Visa and immigration support
Friends	Uncertainty and precarity
	Study abroad decisions
	Political involvement

Academics

Many of the study participants describe both the simple and complex ways that the visa policies affect their academics as it relates to a variety of areas. For example, discussing strict enrollment requirements, Noha (USA CA) recounted multiple stories about international student friends challenged by meeting the enrollment requirements while dealing with mental health issues. The lack of options to reduce the workload resulted in medical leaves that not only impeded their continued progress towards the degree, but also posed strains when they sought to return, as they needed to apply for new study permits, extensions to the time to complete the degree, and they needed to supply medical documentation (Noha, USA CA).

Some students assert there was an influence of visa or permit policies on their decisions about what field they would study while abroad. Mia (Vietnam US) insists that she “pretty much steered away from social science” majors because students who study in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields in the US “have a higher chance of staying in the States” through benefits such as the post-graduation employment STEM OPT extension. Referring to academic progress expectations, Benesh (Afghanistan US) suggests that the visa policy requirements had a positive effect on her, pushing her to get good grades to maintain status. Similarly, Andres (Colombia US) relates that the visa rules “forced [him] to concentrate more in academics” and that the visa rules added positive pressure, through fear of “jeopardizing [his] visa,” to not cheat on exams.

Common to the three case countries are enrollment requirements for students on a study permit or visa. Referring to these regulations, Hachi (Taiwan AU) explained that the full-time enrollment requirement was very limiting and that it “affected a lot of people studying” because they “can’t cut it down to part-time” unless they obtain certification from a psychologist. Hachi (Taiwan AU) herself did this due to mental health issues and noted that she found this requirement fair. Qiaohui (China AU) communicated that there were times when she wanted to lessen her workload due to stress, but she did not because of the enrollment requirement. She feels that this was unfair in comparison with “the local students [who] don’t have the... [same] limitations on enrollment” (Qiaohui, China AU). Olivia (Italy AU) observes the dire consequences of an unauthorized drop below full-time enrollment, recounting a story of receiving worrying communications from the Australian government that her temporary lack of enrollment would be grounds for deportation.

Students studying in Canada identify some of the challenges they faced with the time limitations of their study permit expiration dates. In the face of study permit expirations, Nisha (India CA) describes the renewal process as “strenuous” and full of uncertainties, as the extension is not guaranteed, putting degree completion at risk even though the renewal might simply be needed because the end date on the study permit was listed as prior to an unchanged, original expected date of degree completion. Noha (USA CA) and their boyfriend were quite uncertain that the extension of the study permit would be approved when their boyfriend applied to extend the standard four-year permit to reach the end of his five-year academic program. This was accompanied by stressors related to the time of year when the renewal was needed, as well as the cost of the renewal:

He’s going into his last year and he’s very overwhelmed and he forgot to renew 30 days ahead of the expiration date, and... so the... last few days of December were really, really stressful because we were scrambling to... get everything in and renewed on time because it was going to expire on on January 1 and you have to renew it before it expires... but it means that you have these extra fees... (Noha, USA CA)

Adding to the stress of the renewal was that their boyfriend had failed classes as a first-year student, which meant that there was additional uncertainty if the

permit would be renewed, because it was unclear how those failed courses would look to the authorities reviewing the request.

Andrew (USA CA) asserts there is a “temporal stress of like, ‘I have to finish by the time my study permit runs out.’” Ultimately, the time limit of the study permit had a significant effect on Andrew’s final dissertation: with a pending study permit end date, Andrew left a chapter out of the thesis. He points out:

I was going to have a fifth [chapter], I collected all the data for it, and then, like, looking at the timing over the summer of, like, I’ve still got this much work to do, I talked to my supervisor and I was like, I’m just not going to do this one... the motivating reason for that initially was that I was concerned about being able to finish on time. (Andrew, USA CA)

In the United States, the fact that OPT was limited to students’ chosen field of study led some students to either change their chosen subject or wish that they had. Krishna (Nepal US) used some of the most passionate language about his choice of major, saying that one of his “biggest regrets” is not fully understanding that because he “just kind of studied what [he] wanted to study,” his employment options were going to be restricted to those jobs related to the major. He states:

If I had known I would have probably... just gone out of my way and majored in computer science or business, just to kind of keep my options after I graduated... I would have never done geology. Like it’s honestly... this was one of my biggest regrets in life... if there was no restrictions in what I can work, I think I would have regretted it less but... the visa policy didn’t really affect my decisions back then, but like now looking back I’m like, ‘wow, like, that was actually the dumber thing to do...’ (Krishna, Nepal US)

Krishna further adds:

It made me more resentful of the field [of geology], and I also, like, lost interest because of the resentment... I feel like there needs to be more flexibility, it’s human nature to like, be curious about different things, and like, find new passions... So, in a way, I feel like that’s a very inhumane treatment of international students that can like restrict them in that way. (Krishna, Nepal US)

Trying to learn from that experience, Krishna was considering what his graduate school options might be, hoping to choose a major to “best optimize [his] visa limitations into... what [he] can do to make a living” (Krishna, Nepal US).

Education

Many students indicate that the visa regulations affected their ability to be employed in some way or another. This was often related to employer perceptions of their status as international students, which may have differing levels of overlap

with the reality of the students' legal situations as it pertains to employment. Negar (Iran CA) feels the effects of employers only accepting those who "at least have permanent residency" in Canada and describes this as especially frustrating when "in many cases they [the employers] don't announce" this requirement.

The majority of participants immediately sought to highlight the impact of the work limitation of 20 hours per week. Nisha (India CA) expresses a concern that employers would sometimes request students to work more hours during busy times but that the study permit prevented this. Qiaohui (China AU) shares frustration with a lack of fairness compared to domestic students who were not restricted in the number of hours they were eligible to work.

Some students draw connections between their own and their friends' work experiences and exploitation at the hands of employers. For example, Nisha (India CA) provides stories about friends who were unable to meet their financial obligations under the 20-hour work limit, which led them to "off the books" jobs that did not pay well. She shares:

It's very lucrative so a lot of people go for it, but then they get exploited in the process. Because like hazardous working conditions, they're made to do what that are unsafe for them, like working nights at very disturbing areas and gas stations. (Nisha, India CA)

Referring to exploitation by the university itself, Dee (China US) explains that the 20-hour weekly work limitation was simply overlooked in her employment with the school:

Under F-1 visa, I can only work 20 hours per week. So, this is a little bit funny because as PhD students I'm like a research assistant, right? I work for, you know, eight hours [a day], five days [a week] or more. So, that's already 40 hours, but to fit in this policy, the school just write me as working 20 hours per week.

Relationships

Some of the study participants shared valuable insights into the ways their family and romantic relations were and were not impacted by visa policies. Ekani (Singapore AU), for example, says that the regulations had no effect on romantic relationships, but that perhaps her status as a student in the country made it easier for her family to secure visas for a visit. Qiaohui (China AU) believes that her dating life is unaffected by her status and the regulations, and Aadi (Bangladesh CA) and Ella (France CA) similarly feel no effects. Krishna (Nepal US) provides one example of an influence, illustrating how his romantic relationship is affected by the impermanence and uncertainty of the student visa, explaining

the relationships I choose, like it definitely becomes a bigger question. Like right now, I [have] been in a relationship with someone who's American for over a year. And like I... I've been, like, slowly, like, preparing her to... I will tell her 'okay my visa, like, I'm going to have

to, like, leave the country next year,' and she refuses to, like, kind of go forward into the conversation because it's... such a loaded conversation to have. But that definitely introduces a lot of... instability to the relationship in a lot of ways, because... Yeah, like what options do you have? ...That is gonna cause a lot of difficulties like... So it directly affects that. (Krishna, Nepal US)

Krishna also relates hesitations to invest in his relationship with other hesitations to invest himself in the US in other ways, such as making purchases which would just represent hassles to deal with whenever he is forced to leave in the future. One of Eddy's (Britain AU) negative experiences dating an Australian informed his perspective on future relationships, eventually prompting him to devise a commitment ceremony with his current Australian partner that deliberately did not involve any official paperwork, therefore preventing the possibility that visa considerations would slip into decisions he made about his relationships.

Supplemental

Going beyond the academic, employment, and relationship impacts, the findings also show a variety of other ways in which the ISM policies affected students. This included, for example, differing levels of knowledge of the policy parameters and difficulties trying to navigate the intersections of their time as students with student switching regulations if they seek to remain in their host country more permanently upon program completion. An important, though perhaps not surprising, collection of findings show the extreme uncertainty and precarity associated with living as an international student whose life is circumscribed within local ISM policies. While it was evident in responses from all three countries, it was less prevalent in responses from the students studying in Australia. For Hachi (Taiwan AU), she explains that entering the country was often scary due to a concern that she might have done something wrong that could prevent her from entering the country. Qiaohui (China AU) states that she did not know what might happen if she failed to follow a visa-related rule, but that she might get "a warning letter, or maybe they just cancel the visa." Even if her papers are in order, Afra (Iran CA) expressed her concern that something might happen to prevent her from reentering the country after time away, which influenced her decision not to leave the country while on the student visa. While perhaps not concerned about her ability to enter the country, Ella (France CA) shows frustration with uncertainty around processes, such as not understanding how long a study permit extension might be granted for.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study introduces the idea of *policy pervasion* as the pervasive influence of policy on the lives of individuals. Understanding this, the findings illustrate the wide-ranging ways that ISM policies in particular affect international students,

serving as an empirical foundation for the concept of *ISM policy pervasion*, which is the pervasive influence of ISM (or visa and study permit) policies on the lives of international students. These policies clearly evidence significant and far-reaching effects for students. The idea of ISM policy pervasion is best exemplified by the words of Andres (Colombia US):

Mostly in every single decision I take that is not entirely academic... I always have to be thinking about the impact that that's going to have to my visa, so definitely there is a fear for international students, a constant fear of losing their visa, yes.

This statement by Andres and the responses by participants in this study illustrate how international students are constrained by ISM policies, and are thus prompted to negotiate their actions as students, workers, and agential individuals within the institutionalized ISM policy framework of their host country (Kouba, 2019). ISM policy pervasion sheds light on the institutionalized influence of visa policies on the international student experience and indicates how visa policies impact students in a variety of ways. While the idea of ISM policy pervasion does not presuppose that visa policy is a *primary* concern or influencing factor in the lives of all international students in these host countries, it is founded on the assertion—born from this study's findings—that ISM policies do play an important role in many areas of international students' lives. In short, ISM policy pervasion names the unique policy environment bounding many of the experiences during and subsequent to the student's degree-seeking program in the host country.

Additionally, this notion of policy pervasion denotes the power of policies to exert a controlling influence on these students, so this study has sought to contextualize common anecdotal evidence by providing empirical data from student interviews to identify and outline ISM policy pervasion for those who care about the lived experiences of international students. This study is one of the first to explicitly examine, through student voices, the effects that ISM policies play in their lives. The work of Lynch et al. (2023) provides useful empirical data and findings for such policy pervasion for students dealing with policy uncertainty during the pandemic.

International students studying through student visas and study permits are, in effect, slotting into an education-centered "migration infrastructure" that bounds their experience abroad (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). Even when student voices and an analysis of the policies themselves cannot point to specific policies that might affect or speak to a given student action, students' lack of familiarity or knowledge of policies can have an impact or even chilling effect on student activity. This is exemplified by student accounts of feeling that there are necessary limits on their political involvement, without identifying specific policies that might prohibit or proscribe such activity (Crumley-Effinger, forthcoming). Further examples of this include the general precarity felt by many students, as they expressed concerns that they may not be permitted to reenter the host country or continue their studies despite meeting regulatory requirements for entry.

It is my hope that this qualitative study may serve as a foundation for future quantitative and large-scale research into the effects of ISM policy pervasion. Future studies may, for example, incorporate more student voices, more national contexts, and cover more granular inquiry into ISM policy impacts on students' academics, and professional and personal experiences. With this in mind, this research was undertaken to enhance studies of ISM policy in a number of ways. First, the study responds to the dearth of literature on the ways that international students are affected by visa and study permit policies. Second, this study provides insights into some similarities and differences between ISM policy approaches in three different countries, creating a foundation for future studies to explore how ISM policy pervasion may obtain in other national and policy contexts. Third, the study can be used to contextualize potential future larger-scale quantitative or mixed-methods studies to continue exploring ISM policy pervasion in greater depth by incorporating the voices of more international students from these and other countries.

Identifying and outlining the concept of ISM policy pervasion will ideally provide language that can be used by students, educators, and policymakers to more succinctly discuss the role ISM policy plays in the lives of international students. It may also provide a point of departure from which policymakers can draw on student voices to reconsider, adjust, and critique such policies. Just as importantly, one may consider the value of broadening and deepening educators' knowledge to better understand the contours of ISM policy effects, which may provide new insights into actionable areas to develop international student support services and contribute to policy advocacy activities. In this same vein, a better understanding of ISM policy pervasion may be useful for engaging institutional stakeholders who are unfamiliar with immigration topics as it relates to international students.

Ideally, studies on policy pervasion can support efforts to advocate for institutional resources to support students, improve student-centered systems and mechanisms for institutional immigration compliance, and more. Finally, coming in contact with the ideas outlined explicitly as ISM policy pervasion may benefit both prospective and current international students as they consider how the policy context in their (potential) host country might affect their lives beyond simply facilitating access to degree programs in the host country.

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