

International students' concept of "home" shapes post-graduation plans

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International students' migration plans are more complex than "stay or return" finds UBC study. Photo: [Jon Bowen / Flickr](#)

How international university students think about home significantly influences their migration plans upon graduation, according to a new study from the University of British Columbia.

"A lot of research focuses on where international students go to study, but few focus on where they go after graduation," said study author Cary Wu, a PhD candidate in UBC's department of sociology and an international student from China. "Our study shows that migration plans for international students are far more complex than this binary of stay or return."

Wu analyzed data from interviews with more than 200 international students from more than 50 countries who attended UBC from 2006 to 2013. He found that students had four ways of thinking about home: as host, as ancestral, as cosmopolitan and as nebulous. These concepts of home influenced the students' decisions to stay, return, be open to either option or move to a new or third place in which they have already lived.

"We tend to think people migrate based on a single factor like a job offer or a family obligation," said Wu. "But these factors alone aren't enough. What's more important in their decision-making is how they think about home. It determines where post-grads look for jobs and where they establish close relationships."



Cary Wu

If students thought of their host home as "home", their plan was to stay. Of the 232 students interviewed, 16 per cent planned to stay in Canada, citing emotional attachments, interpersonal relationships, family or political unrest. The

more welcomed they felt, the more likely they were to stay. Neema, an undergraduate student from Tanzania, said: “A lot of the times I tell people this, that I spend more time here than I actually do at home. So this is home again.”

If home was seen as ancestral, the plan was to return. Roughly 27 per cent of the students said they would return home. Students from the United States, France and Australia planned to return largely due to social and family ties. For some students from China and Japan, the decision to return was partially due to language barriers, difficulties fitting into the local culture, or discrimination. Meili, an undergraduate student from China, said: “I don’t know how to be a part of Canadian culture or Western culture. Like adapt. I think that’s a problem for most international student(s).” For African students, many planned to return out of a sense of obligation to their town or village.

Almost 57 per cent of students were open to any migration plan, including moving somewhere else. Wu said many international students have actually lived in two or three different countries prior to studying in Canada, so they can perceive home to be in multiple places. “For cosmopolitan types, they are people who feel like they could fit in anywhere,” he said.

For a large group of students who saw home as nebulous, or unclear, they did not feel like they fit in anywhere and have experienced identity confusion, displacement and rootlessness. Saya, a student from Yemen, said: “Home is the world. I feel like I identify with so many different countries and so many different places that I can’t call one place home. Home is where I have a bed to sleep on, for me. I don’t know if I’ve ever felt at home anywhere.”

Wu said understanding the motivations and experiences of students who study abroad, especially in the context of the global competition for talent, helps inform scholarship and policy on migration.

“Our study shows international students are not a monolithic group,” said UBC sociology professor Rima Wilkes, Wu’s co-author and supervisor. “Their ideas of home are as diverse as who they are as people. There’s a lot to learn from that.”



Background

The study, “[International Students’ Post-Graduation Migration Plans and the Search for Home](#)”, was published online today in the journal *Geoforum*.

Names of the international students who participated in the study are pseudonyms. They are not available for interviews.

UBC sociology professor Wendy Roth provided the study’s data set.

More than five million students are currently enrolled in higher education outside their country of citizenship, a number estimated to increase to seven million by 2020, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Study