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# Intra-Africa Student Mobility and Social Class Reproduction: Implications for Equity and Inclusivity

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**Tibelius Amutuhaire**[1]

## Abstract

International Student Mobility (ISM) is the most popular activity in the internationalization of higher education, and it has grown over the years in terms of numbers and study destinations. This study examines intra-African student mobility using evidence from East Africa and theoretical orientations of critical internationalization, which holds that internationalization thrives on and propagates inequalities between individuals and social systems. The study investigated the extent to which intra-African ISM reproduces social inequalities using data collected through mixed methods and analyzed using SPSS and thematic analysis. The study shows that international students in Uganda are mainly from the East African region and are from the wealthiest families. The findings further indicate that these students and their households seek to reproduce their social status by participating in ISM. However, expanding mobility opportunities in favor of students from lower social classes would make internationalization more equitable and inclusive.

## Keywords

internationalization, student mobility, equity, inclusivity, East Africa

[1]Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS), Bayreuth, Germany

**Corresponding Author:**
Tibelius Amutuhaire, Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS), Bayreuth, Germany.
Email: tibelius.amutuhaire@uni-bayreuth.de

## Introduction

Social class is a relational concept that defines and ranks groups of people in a society (Schwadel, 2016). Relatedly, Thompson (2016) defines social class as a hierarchical classification of individuals based on wealth, educational attainment, occupation, income, and membership in a subculture or social network. Bourdieu (1987) holds similar ideas, claiming that class encompasses material resources and cultural, symbolic, and social capital. Each given culture has diverse social classes, which must be considered to comprehend societal differences.

Di Pietro (2020) states that international student mobility (ISM) reproduces the differences between social classes. This viewpoint is supported by Waters (2006), who contends that social class reproduction occurs when families facilitate their children to acquire foreign educational qualifications to gain a competitive advantage in the labor market and maintain their social position. However, studies undertaken in the global North (Bourdieu, 1986; Brooks & Waters, 2011) have shown that students who participate in study abroad programs mostly come from privileged backgrounds with a strong foundation of social capital associated with reliable financial and social stability, whereas those in disadvantaged circumstances do not have comparable options. Only students from privileged backgrounds have the necessary symbolic capital to facilitate ISM (Bourdieu, 1986), such that those from disadvantaged backgrounds miss out on several benefits of studying abroad, including personal development (Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013), increased employment opportunities before and after graduation (Di Pietro, 2015), and higher earnings (Kratz & Netz, 2018). This reinforces their disadvantaged social class position.

The conclusions from the aforementioned studies relate to the global North's context but could also apply to other contexts. This paper uses East African evidence to examine the veracity of these viewpoints. It is unclear how ISM contributes to social class reproduction in East Africa, considering the questionable social systems in the global South, highlighted in some studies (Hao, 2012; Kotsi & Agiomirgianakis, 2013). It is questionable whether social institutions in East Africa provide the essential social capital for ISM.

The premise behind social capital is that graduates profit significantly from participating in ISM (Waters, 2007). Such advantages may be more visible in the global North than in Africa, where unemployment and underemployment rates remain high (ILO, 2021). In the United Kingdom, for example, ISM is associated with high employment rewards; thus, many families invest in ISM because of the numerous expected benefits following graduation (Bourdieu, 1987). Research linking ISM to social class in Africa is underrepresented in the literature. While UNDP (2017) and Harsch (2017) acknowledge that disparities are present in Africa, selective participation in ISM will likely increase existing imbalances.

Rodny-Gumede (2024) opines that intra-Africa student mobility programs are underfunded highest level of education and can thus serve a small fraction of the intended students. At the same time, a previous study (Amutuhaire, 2023) argues

that ISM, as an internationalization strategy, discriminates against students with impairments, refugees, and those from low-income families. This paper builds on these views by providing empirical evidence from East Africa. In its various forms, the internationalization of higher education should help institutions become more inclusive and relevant to human development (Jones et al., 2021). This study uncovers the weaknesses related to ISM in East Africa, serving as a starting point for enhancing the region's quality of internationalization. It would be preferable if intra-African ISM could become more equitable, inclusive, and relevant to Africa's development (ICEF Monitor, 2025).

Measures of social class are based on a combination of variables such as formal education credentials, occupation titles, income, and wealth (Avvisati, 2020). In this study, social class is assessed using parental education and household income, interpreted through an African context where income thresholds proposed by the African Development Bank (2011) are used to classify lower, middle, and upper classes.

Darin-Mattsson et al. (2017) argue that an individual's highest level of educational achievement bridges socioeconomic gaps across generations. As a result, a highly educated parent and his children belong to a high social class. The student's social class is indirectly measured by determining the parents' highest level of education (a social class indicator). In addition to education level, household income is used to measure social class since it impacts economic security and stability (Darin-Mattsson et al., 2017). That is, household income determines the financial resources available to the student.

This study assesses parents' levels of education and household income to determine the social class of student participants. A student's social class was determined using an average index of parental educational attainment and a measure of household income. The paper uses data from Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi to clarify the relationship between social class reproduction and intra-Africa ISM. While this study does not assess employment outcomes for East Africa's internationally mobile students, it does provide insight into how social class positioning influences existing ISM trends in East Africa.

## Literature Review

Student mobility is often shaped by social class, with earlier studies arguing that international student mobility (ISM) has long been dominated by elite groups (Ballatore & Ferede, 2013; Lee & Wright, 2016; Tsang, 2013). However, more recent work (Deuchar, 2022; Tran & Vu, 2018; Xu, 2017) suggests growing participation by students from less privileged backgrounds. Iorio and Pereira (2018), for example, argue that students from lower social classes may use ISM to challenge their socioeconomic status, gaining not just academic credentials but access to social capital, upward mobility, and expanded opportunities (see also Kelly & Lusis, 2006).

Yet, these dynamics remain underexplored in intra-African contexts. Students from less affluent households may pursue intra-regional ISM to avoid the high costs of

South–North mobility. Still, the classed nature of these choices and their implications remain largely unexamined. While researchers like Horst et al. (2016) and Kelly and Lusis (2006) have addressed class dynamics in mobility, their work is largely focuses on non-African settings. Studies from the continent (e.g., Agbaje, 2023; Amutuhaire, 2023) tend to focus on the structural benefits and challenges of mobility but rarely link them explicitly to class reproduction. This paper aims to fill that gap, focusing on Uganda as a major host of international students, with Rwanda and Burundi as key sending countries.

## *International Student Mobility and Social Classes in Rwanda*

Rwanda's colonial and post-colonial history offers important context for understanding East Africa's class dynamics in education. Historically, the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa were socio-political categories linked to occupational roles (King, 2014). Colonial rule deepened these divisions, favoring the Tutsi minority in education and governance (Moshman, 2015). Education access under Belgian rule was highly unequal, and favored Tutsi children to advance while most Hutu children dropped out of schools. Thus, ethnicity, which determined one's social status was the most important concern for Rwandans (Dennehy, 2020). At some point in time, Rwandans had identity cards specifying their ethnicity, and by extension, their social class.

After independence in 1962, the power dynamic shifted, with the Hutu majority restricting access for the Tutsi. Yet, social class-based exclusions persisted, now benefiting different groups (Dennehy, 2020). Moshman (2015) says that Rwandans have a predisposition to perpetuate social class and reinforce social inequity, despite the Rwandan government's position that Rwandans should not be classed based on ethnicity. Thus, the inherited impacts of these ethnic and social classes have persisted.

Rwanda has a policy that encourages ISM (Trines, 2019). However, given the country's weak economic capacity, only a few Rwandan HE students are supported to study abroad. Those who receive such an education always want the same for their children since foreign qualifications are more preferred than those obtained at home (Waters, 2006). Thus, whether deliberate or not, social class status is often reproduced in this fashion. This explains why Rwanda has the highest levels of inequality in East Africa (Orrnert, 2018). Rwanda's context contradicts Iorio and Pereira's (2018) view that lower social class students might use ISM to resist social class positioning. Rwanda's context must be reinterpreted in light of the country's social and historical factors.

Furthermore, recent development trends in Rwanda have exacerbated social inequality. Students from more affluent regions, especially in the south, have access to better secondary schools and thus greater chances of qualifying for international education (Corey, 2019). For many Rwandan families, especially those who previously studied abroad, ISM remains a way of reproducing social privilege. This complicates assertions (e.g., Iorio & Pereira, 2018) that ISM can help students transcend class barriers, at least in Rwanda's case, ISM often reinforces them.

### International Student Mobility and Social Classes in Burundi

Burundi shares a parallel colonial history, marked by ethnic hierarchies constructed under Belgian rule. The Tutsi were favored with administrative roles and educational access, while the Hutu majority was excluded (Dunlop, 2021). These disparities persisted after independence, with the Tutsi dominating political and educational institutions (Call, 2012; Nkurunziza, 2012).

Educational spending under successive regimes was uneven, particularly benefiting the southern regions where elite families resided. At some point, there were as many as 23 Tutsi graduates for every Hutu (Jackson, 2000). Teachers were predominantly Tutsi, and university enrollments were skewed in their favor (Panabel, 1988; Verwimp, 2019). This longstanding advantage allowed the Tutsi to secure better jobs and reproduce their social status through education (Bourdieu, 1986).

Even today, Burundian students studying abroad are generally from wealthier families, as international education requires both financial and symbolic capital (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2002). Given the paucity of data on ISM trends in Burundi, these conclusions rely on broader patterns of social and educational inequality. Still, the link between privilege and ISM is clear: the elite continue to position themselves and their children to benefit from ISM, while the disadvantaged remain on the margins.

Creating more equitable access to ISM is essential, not just for fairness in education, but to prevent those same inequalities from spilling into labor markets (Netz & Finger, 2016). While affluent students can leverage their mobility experiences into better jobs (Di Pietro, 2015), students from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack the means to participate in these opportunities. This study highlights how ISM in East Africa continues to reflect and reinforce existing class hierarchies and points to ways these patterns might be challenged.

## Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design to explore the research question: "How does social class privilege influence ISM in East Africa?" Two universities in Uganda—Makerere University (MU) and Kampala International University (KIU)—were purposively selected due to their contrasting public-private governance models and high international student enrollment. The study population comprised international students, university staff in charge of international students, and officials from national HE councils.

For the quantitative part, a simple random sample was drawn from the email lists of MU and KIU international students. Simple random sampling offered each student in the population an equal chance of selection, reducing selection bias and enhancing the representativeness of the sample, which is important when seeking to make broader inferences about structural patterns like social class and access. Yamane's (1967) formula, $[n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)]$, was used to calculate the sample size. (n is the sample size,

N is the population, and e is the precision level, i.e., 5% in this case). A sample of 437 international students, comprising 229 students from MU (out of 537) and 208 from KIU (out of 433), was used. Of the 437 surveyed students, only 195 completed the questionnaire, i.e., a 55% response rate, which is above the typical averages for online questionnaires (Wu et al., 2022) was realized.

Although responses were drawn from a range of nationalities, this analysis focuses specifically on students from Rwanda (n = 52) and Burundi (n = 37). These students were selected because of their sufficient sample size and representation across both universities, and their shared colonial and postcolonial trajectories. Under Belgian administration, Rwanda and Burundi experienced ethnic and class-based educational stratification, where colonial authorities privileged the Tutsi for advanced schooling and international opportunities (Dunlop, 2021; King, 2014). This institutionalized inequity left long-standing social class divisions that continue to shape access to HE, including opportunities for intra-Africa mobility. Focusing on these two groups allows for a more coherent and historically grounded comparative analysis of how social class privilege is reproduced in ISM within East Africa.

The self-administered questionnaire covered demographic details, parental education and income, and perceptions of access and privilege. To ensure content validity, questionnaire items were reviewed by five HE researchers and revised based on I-CVI scores. Internal consistency was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha, with all subscales scoring $\geq 0.70$. Data were analyzed using SPSS to produce descriptive statistics, allowing patterns of privilege to be inferred from parental socioeconomic data.

In the qualitative part, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted, 10 with students (3 from Rwanda, 4 from Burundi, 2 from South Sudan, and 1 from the Democratic Republic of Congo) and 5 with key informants, including two international student officers (from MU and KIU), two officials from the national higher education councils (in Uganda and Burundi) and a Ugandan immigration officer. These participants were selected because of their first-hand knowledge of the students' experiences and the institutional or policy context.

The interviews were recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic framework. A mixture of inductive and deductive coding was used to identify themes such as political barriers, class-based exclusion, and mobility dynamics. NVivo supported the analysis and enabled triangulation with survey data to gain deeper insights.

## Findings

This section considers two key indicators of social class—parents' level of education and household income—and their influence on the mobility of HE students from Rwanda and Burundi into Uganda. The analysis focuses on international students from Rwanda and Burundi due to their historically similar colonial experiences, particularly the legacy of Belgian rule that entrenched educational access along ethnic and class lines (Dunlop, 2021; King, 2014). During the colonial period, formal education

was restricted to a privileged few, and hence a tool of selective social mobility. While post-independence reforms have expanded access, the deeper structural dynamics remain: class-based inequalities in access to quality secondary education, language acquisition, and mobility preparation persist. These shared historical legacies continue to shape who is most likely to engage in international study, even within the African continent. By examining these two cases, this study reveals how historical stratification shapes intra-Africa student mobility.

## Parents' Education Level

International students were asked to report their parents' level of education. Following Hardy and Marcotte (2020), those with no high school qualification were categorized as lower class, those with academic degrees as upper class, and the remainder as middle class. Parents with qualifications between high school and academic degrees are in the middle class. Further, a coding scale in which a Bachelor's degree or higher scored 8, and education below high school scored 3, was used. Educational levels between a high school certificate and a Bachelor's level were coded greater than 3 but less than 8. The average level for parents' level of education (PLoE) was calculated and utilized to create a bar graph in Figure 1.

While the analysis presented in this paper centers on the 89 respondents from Rwanda and Burundi, Figures 1 and 2 reflect patterns across the full dataset (n = 195) to illustrate broader trends in parental education and household income. Figure 1 shows that 55.3% of respondents had parents with at least a bachelor's degree,

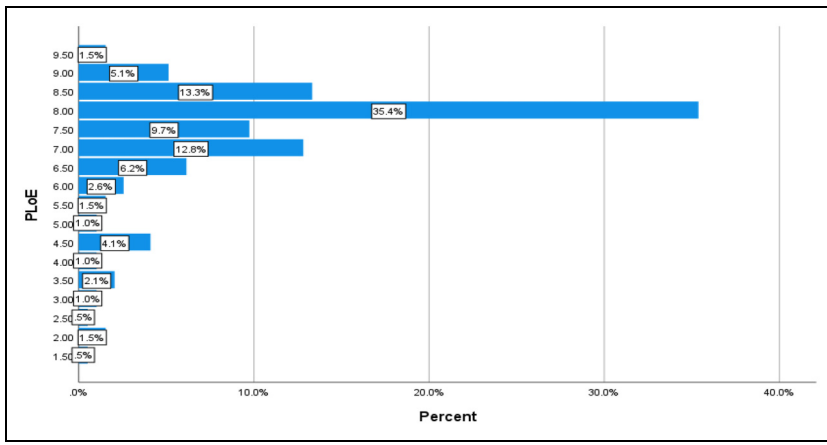


**Figure 1.** Average Parental Education Level Among All Respondents (n = 195), Presented as Percentages.

*Note.* This figure includes data from all survey respondents, not limited to the analytical subset (Rwanda and Burundi).

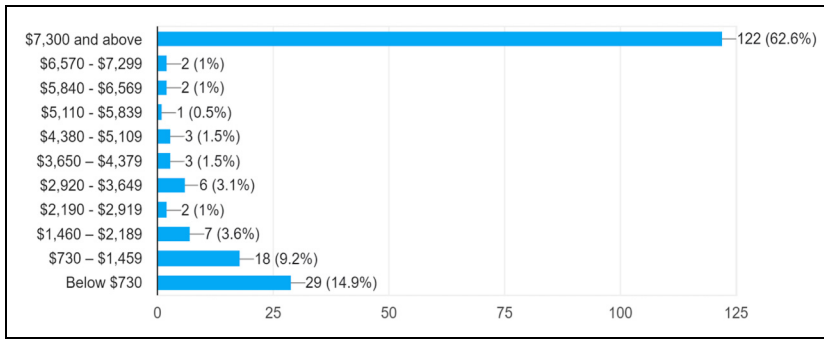


**Figure 2.** Household Income Levels among all Respondents (n = 195), Displayed in Absolute Numbers and Percentages.

aligning them with the higher social class. Another 41.2% had parents with qualifications between high school and college diplomas, placing them in the middle class. Only 3.5% reported parents without a high school education. These results suggest that most international students in this study come from middle or upper-class backgrounds since parents' social class influences children's social class (Darin-Mattsson et al., 2017).

This finding is consistent with earlier studies. Stankovic et al. (2016) show that highly educated parents provide stronger support and motivation to their children to study abroad. Thus, students with highly educated parents are more likely to study abroad than those with less educated parents. The OECD (2012) also notes that students with highly educated parents are more likely to complete degrees. Therefore, a parent's level of education influences a child's participation in education in general and ISM in particular.

Parental education also shapes decision-making (ICEF Monitor, 2019). As role models, advisors, and financial sponsors, educated parents are more likely to value and support ISM (Eldegwy et al., 2022). Consider the following response:

> I had planned to study at the University of Toronto in Canada, where my father studied; however, the admission procedures were complicated, and I was not admitted. I applied to Makerere and was admitted. (Interview with a Rwandan international student at MU, November 16th, 2022).

This comment illustrates Bourdieu's (1984) idea of 'taste' in all attributes that distinguish social classes. In Rwanda, where ethnic and social classes were institutionalized during colonialism and exacerbated by post-independence conflicts, education has always been a mechanism for upward mobility. Education reforms after the genocide prioritized reconciliation, but did not eliminate class inequalities. Students whose parents studied abroad (especially during the diaspora years) tend to retain elite status. Similarly, in Burundi, repeated political instabilities and limited educational

infrastructure reduced access to quality education. Thus, access to international education today reflects historical privileges accumulated during relative peace or exile.

Parents with foreign education backgrounds not only influence decisions but also cultivate 'mobility capital' — the abroad experiences that youngsters collect early in life (Cobbett, 2007). Students with mobility capital are more likely to participate in ISM compared to those without it (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Besides providing them with prior international exposure, hence preparing them for ISM (Saarikallio-Torp & Wiers-Jenssen, 2010), parents also inspire their children to pursue international education or to follow in their footsteps (Eldegwy et al., 2022). Thus, well-educated upper-class families use their children's foreign education status to reinforce and promote their social strata and positions.

However,Hardy and Marcotte's (2020) view of educational attainment as a social class indicator reflects the U.S. context. High levels of education lead to higher employment outcomes in global North economies (Hajdari & Feta, 2022), resulting in higher salaries, material possessions, and social class. In Africa, however, education does not always translate into economic power due to unemployment and underemployment (ILO, 2021). Thus, in addition to the parents' educational level, household income is considered in determining international students' social classes.

## Household Income Level

The study examined household income to establish international students' social classes. Respondents selected income ranges matching their family's annual income. Figure 2 shows these distributions. Based on African Development Bank (2011) thresholds, those earning over $7,300 annually are upper class, $730–$7,300 are middle class, and those earning below $730 are lower class.

The figures displayed reflect the full survey sample, prior to narrowing the focus to the Rwanda and Burundi subset used in the core analysis. Based on the African Development Bank [AfDB] (2011) and Figure 2, 62.6% of students come from upper-class families, 22.5% from the middle class, and 14.9% from the lower class.

The influence of household income on ISM begins with how household income influences enrolment in education generally, and HE in particular. According to the British Council (2014), increased household incomes promote enrolment in HE, and this has significant implications for ISM in terms of its drivers, including the desire for higher quality education or national capacity to deliver education). Thus, the level of household income as an ISM driver interacts with other mobility drivers to inform any discernible mobility trend.

Approximately 38% of respondents indicated that it was easy to pay for their education, while about 28% of them found it challenging. Those who found it easier to fund their education had parents from a higher social level. Moreover, the lower levels of education must be funded before HE, which is easier for middle and upper-class households. Affluent families might enroll their children in high-fee private institutions to prepare them for future study-abroad chances (Brooks & Waters, 2009). This

**Table 1.** Distribution of Students by Social Class Based on Parental Education and Household Income (n = 195).

| Indicator of social class | International students in the high social class | International students in the middle social class | International students in the lower social class | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parents' education level | 108(55.3%) | 80(41.2%) | 07(3.5%) | 195(100%) |
| Household income level | 122(62.6%) | 44(22.5%) | 29(14.9%) | 195(100%) |
| Average | **115(59%)** | **62(31.8)** | **18(9.2%)** | **195(100%)** |

*Note.* This table presents aggregate data from all respondents. Core findings and analysis in this paper focus on the subset of 89 students from Rwanda and Burundi.

demonstrates that household income influences entrance into educational institutions and ISM. Families that can easily afford all levels of education belong to the upper social class, as shown in the following response:

> Students from wealthy families in Burundi attend international schools that prepare them to study abroad. International schools charge higher fees that are only affordable to high-class families. For the same reason, higher education students who study in foreign countries will be from a higher social class. (Interview with an official from the National Commission for HE in Burundi, December 1st, 2022).

ISM is a planned experience nurtured by the student's family to perpetuate their social class over time (Waters, 2012), and it depends on one's level of social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), both of which are influenced by household income levels.

## Social Class and International Student Mobility: a General Discussion

Although data were collected from a broader pool of international students, this paper focused specifically on Rwandan and Burundian students to enable consistent comparisons. This selective focus enhances interpretive clarity while acknowledging that further research is needed to capture the diversity of experiences across other nationalities. Table 1 combines the education and income data to show the distribution of students by social class.

Although our primary focus is on a subset of respondents, Table 1 summarizes responses from the entire sample to provide broader context. It shows that most international students (59%) are from the high social class, followed by those from the middle social class (31.8%), with those from the lower social class being the least represented (9.2%). This finding concurs with Iorio and Pereira's (2018) view that ISM depends on the student's social class. This is because international education

requires significant symbolic capital, typically only available to affluent families. Indeed, for upper-class families, ISM is a tactic for maintaining class or position (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus, while intra-African mobility has increased (Sehoole & Lee, 2021), it has yet to narrow the gap between high and low socioeconomic status.

According to Saarikallio-Torp and Wiers-Jenssen (2010), pursuing foreign qualifications represents a high-class behavior pattern or cultural identity. Given its degree of development and colonial history, Africa, more than any other continent, must address persistent societal inequities. Participation in ISM should be made more accessible to students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, so that many can reap the benefits as the continent works to attain the SDGs.

While the findings in Table 1 depict the popular view that ISM is an elite practice (Iorio & Pereira, 2018), some students from lower classes also participate. For instance, the international students officer at MU had this to say:

> Many international students come from wealthy families; however, some are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and usually experience financial constraints. Some students come to me expressing their worries: 'I do not know how to survive this semester. Can you get me a job in a supermarket or restaurant?' One cannot falsely generalize that all international students are wealthy. (Interview on November 15th, 2022).

This response demonstrates the diversity of social classes among international students in Uganda's universities. As critical internationalization advocates, students from disadvantaged backgrounds must have their perspectives heard (Buckner & Stein, 2020).

The participation of lower social class students in ISM reflects 'resistance' to social class positioning (Iorio & Pereira, 2018), a struggle for inclusion, and a belief in hard effort and persistence to overcome class barriers. However, Yang (2018) warns that, even though ISM has expanded to include students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such students are typically enrolled in low-grade courses (for which they can afford to pay) that do not lead to better employment outcomes. In such instances, ISM is less likely to offer opportunities for low-class students to advance up the social class ladder. In that case, the high social class students remain better positioned to benefit more from ISM and reproduce the social status of their families.

As shown in Table 1, international students in Uganda come from all social classes, with the majority coming from the high class. It should be noted that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds cannot equally afford international education, as expressed in the views of Uganda's HE Officer at the NCHE:

> Some international students voluntarily choose to study in a foreign country. These are mainly students from wealthy families who can afford to pay all the education costs in a foreign country. There should be scholarships in specific study programs to enable lower social class students to access international education and make it more inclusive. (Interview on December 15th, 2022).

This response underscores and emphasizes the role of scholarship funds in enabling lower social class students to pursue international education. The response also aligns with SDG 4b, which aims to increase the number of scholarships available to developing nations, particularly LDCs, Small Island States, and African countries, for HE enrollment. On the other hand, scholarships have remained few in East Africa (Adima, 2021), and the few that exist are aimed at students who leave Africa (Kigotho, 2020).

Social class inequalities impede the accumulation of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). As a result, brilliant students from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds have fewer opportunities to advance in their studies. From a social justice standpoint, a person's birth situation should not be the primary determinant of their destiny; at the very least, human characteristics like effort and motivation should be allowed to succeed. As a result, interventions to assist capable but needy students (such as scholarships) should be implemented to increase the odds of lower-income students participating in HE (Laajaj et al., 2022), particularly ISM.

Oxfam (2019) also emphasizes that if higher-quality education is only available to the wealthy, people of the lower social groups will be unable to advance. Poverty will be passed on to the offspring indefinitely until better education is provided. This degrades social institutions by segregating the rich and the poor, generates class-based social systems, and perpetuates a scenario similar to that of several African countries during colonial periods. In certain nations, colonists constructed separate schools for Africans of inferior quality compared to those meant for Europeans (Malisa & Missedja, 2019). In such cases, students from affluent backgrounds are denied the opportunity to socialize with those from underprivileged backgrounds, and vice versa. This inhibits both social groups' perspectives on themselves and their communities. While many players worldwide try to ensure everyone's sustainable development is considered, affirmative action discourse must include the democratization of ISM.

The study illustrates how ISM functions as a mechanism of reproducing social privilege in Rwanda and Burundi rather than disrupting it. However, these patterns do not emerge in isolation. They are rooted in deeper structural inequalities, shaped by colonial legacies, uneven public investment, and post-conflict state rebuilding processes. Historical disparities in accessing quality primary and secondary education, coupled with urban-rural divides, have constrained who can develop the symbolic capital essential for pursuing ISM.

Structural challenges, including selective public investment, shape access to study abroad opportunities before students join HE. Consequently, ISM becomes both a reflection and a reinforcement of pre-existing class hierarchies. While this study highlights the mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced within ISM, these practices function within a broader political-economic framework that includes the enduring impacts of state formation, governance, and global development aid logics in East Africa, which must be approached systemically. In this study's context, and as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) argues, a wholly internationalized HE system should attempt to eliminate injustices based on gender, socioeconomic class, ethnicity,

religion, and race to establish just social systems and re-humanize individuals. Efforts to internationalize HE in Africa will remain limited in impact unless concrete measures such as needs-based mobility scholarships, targeted outreach, and inclusive policy frameworks are taken to support students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

## Conclusion

This article investigated how ISM in East Africa reproduces socioeconomic classes by considering parents' education levels and household incomes. The data show that most international students in Uganda are from the high social class and the least represented are those from the lower social. Given the potential benefits of international education (at least in theory), students from higher social classes are likely to have excellent job possibilities and high wages. Such privileges would keep them in a privileged position. Thus, ISM in East Africa exemplifies class reproduction by affluent families, with offspring educated at foreign institutions expected to carry on the family legacy. Such students usually enroll in the best African universities.

Given that only students from the high social classes usually study this way, it perpetuates an unequal society's legacy. While the privileged social groups (high and middle classes) are well represented among international students, the number of lower-class students cannot be overlooked. The presence of such students represents an attempt by lower social class students to fight social class positioning by utilizing ISM to transcend social classes. However, the likelihood of this occurring remains doubtable. More important is how to involve more disadvantaged students in ISM to make it more equal and inclusive for the greater good of humanity.

HEIs should remove barriers to using their services and minimize the classification of students into opposing subclasses. For example, the high fees limiting students' access to international education must be addressed so that lower-income students can benefit from foreign education. Indeed, this principle underpins East African institutions' yet-to-be-implemented tuition reform program. The intervention aims to establish similar tuition fees for national and East African students at regional universities. Similar to this East African initiative, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has also pursued ISM through mechanisms such as the Protocol on Education and Training, including regional fee structures and credit recognition (Trines, 2023). East Africa can learn from this SADC example, and also pursue alternative ideas such as curriculum internationalization, are feasible based on the concept of a 'university without barriers' to achieve equitable and socially responsible internationalization.

Thus, considering the theoretical views on social class reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986), intra-Africa ISM allows students to acquire enough symbolic capital to impact the lives of their family members, both now and in the future. To improve the quality of life for many people in the long term, lower-income students should be supported in accessing international education opportunities, such as through scholarships.

Although this paper identifies how ISM in East Africa reproduces rather than disrupts social class privilege, this researcher acknowledges that these practices are symptomatic of deeper structural and historical inequalities. Addressing these requires not only reforming HE financing and admissions systems, but also confronting long-standing inequities in pre-university education, regional investment, and national development planning. A more socially just ISM depends on coordinated, multi-level efforts that combine policy reform with structural transformation.

## ORCID iD

Tibelius Amutuhaire https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4712-6001

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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## Author Biography

**Tibelius Amutuhaire** is a higher education researcher and policy consultant. His research focuses on internationalisation, student mobility, philanthropy, and equity in African higher education.