

## Chapter 32. Social Determinants of International Students' Mobility: PhD Students from Turkey

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### Introduction

*“Student mobility is never a neutral act – something that ‘just happens’. Rather, it is filled with social, cultural and political meaning. Therefore, it is a worthy subject of study...”*

(Waters and Brooks, 2011, p130)

Today, government policies of developing and also of the most developed countries, as well as, universities encourage domestic students to study abroad (Waters and Brooks, 2011). Behind the arguments to support the involvement of governments and international organisations in international mobility of students is the assumption that studying abroad is beneficial at an individual, national and international level. It seems an inevitable aspect of 21st century education (IIE, 2014). This assumption is also based on the premise that studying abroad will end with the return of students. However, evidence suggests (e.g. Dreher and Pautvaara, 2005; Teichler, 2007; Rosenzweig, 2008; Robertson, 2011) that studying abroad does not always result in the return of students to their home country, findings from a large number studies (Bhagwati, 2003; Gungor and Tansel, 2005; Hercog and van de Laar, 2013; Stephen et al., 2013) suggest that doctorate students are less likely to return home compared to bachelor and master students.

Information and knowledge have become the centre of a country's economic growth and development, creating what is called the ‘knowledge economy’ (Powell and Snellman, 2004). This relies on the increasing demand for highly qualified people, leading countries around the world to utilize their efforts towards retaining international students. International students are, for example, described in much research as an important component of highly qualified migration, in demand by governments for recruitment (Beine et al., 2013; Levatino, 2014; OECD, 2014) or seen as a “precursor of future migrations” (Tremblay, 2004, p3). In recent years, there has been extreme competition amongst countries to attract researchers and it is assumed that the battle for highly qualified people is likely to increase in future (Meyer, 2003; Avveduto, 2012; Boeri et al., 2012). Although the proportion of doctoral graduates is relatively low in comparison with other segments of the overall population, their crucial role in the knowledge-based economy is undeniable (OECD, 2010a). While Docquier and Rapoport (2009) define PhD holders who migrate as ‘the cream of the cream’, Bouwel and Veugelers (2012) describe them

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as an 'elite brain drain' by emphasizing the fact that they are the best and brightest ones amongst highly qualified mobile groups. Consequently, understanding the factors influencing international students preferred mobility behaviour and encouraging or discouraging their return decisions has become important (Dayton-Johnson et al., 2009; Hercog and van de Laar, 2013).

This study's findings could be significant for those countries that have similar experiences to Turkey and the UK in terms of tackling the loss of highly qualified people or attracting them, in order to expand the highly qualified proportion of their population. It would also be helpful to both the UK government and its related bodies, for instance, the British Council, the Home Office and future research on international student flows and highly qualified mobility e.g. OECD, the World Bank.

### **Research Focus**

This research seeks to develop a theoretical framework encompassing social factors underlying international PhD students' future mobility plans, drawing upon the Theory of Structuration by Giddens and the Capability Approach by Sen. It will focus upon PhD students from Turkey (Sending Country) in the UK (Receiving Country). The main motivation behind choosing these two countries is that the UK is the second most popular destination for international students in the world (UKCISA, 2016) and international students comprise the second highest proportion of UK migrants (Jena and Reilly, 2013). Turkey is one of top international student sending countries in the world and one of the target markets for international students of late for the UK (HM Government, 2013). In the last decade non-returning students have become an important issue for Turkey (Gungor and Tansel, 2014).

The main objectives of this study are to: (1) identify the factors impacting on the mobility of international students, particularly focusing on the return and non-return plans of PhD students from Turkey. (2) evaluate how far the capabilities and functioning of international students influence their mobility, particularly focusing on whether or not studying abroad develops their capabilities in such a way as to enhance their mobility.

The main motives behind focusing on international students' mobility are as follows: *First, despite a rising trend in international student mobility worldwide, international student mobility remains an unexplored area. Doctoral researchers in particular have been overlooked* (MPG, 2012; Beine et al., 2013; Lindberg et al., 2014; Czaika and Toma, 2015). A limited number of studies has examined undergraduate student international mobility (Knight and Madden, 2010), but only very few have focused on the motivations influencing doctoral researchers' mobility, a process not well understood (Gueno, 2015; Pasztor, 2015; Netz and Jaksztat, 2014). Due to the recognition of the crucial role of international students and researchers in the creation of knowledge economy, those who do not return to their country of origin after graduation have been a matter of increasing concern for countries' governments, policy makers together with international organizations (Gungor and Tansel, 2005; MPG, 2012; UUK, 2014). For PhD holders especially,

who are seen as key components of a knowledge-based economy, this issue has become more significant (Auriol et al., 2013).

*Second, due to less attention being given to international student mobility, a number of aspects remain unexplored in the literature. It is still not clear: what international PhD students do upon graduation (Suoglu, 2012; Lee and Kim, 2010), whether studying abroad stimulates the decision to remain in a country of study or what conditions lead to the non-return decision of students (Levatino, 2014), the motivational factors behind international student mobility and its consequences (Baruffaldi and Landoni 2010), factors enhancing or inhibiting their mobility together with their experiences in a host country (Bilecen, 2009; Kim and Locke, 2010), the reasons for leaving the home country or vice-versa, returning back to the home country (Gibson and McKenzie, 2009; Harvey, 2011), whether international students are considered as migrants or mobiles (Bilecen, 2009) and whether international student mobility represents a potential brain drain or brain circulation (Avveduto, 2012; Lindberg et al., 2014).*

### **Theoretical Background**

There are two main theoretical shortcomings of the literature. *The first shortcoming is that previous studies have often been based on one level (micro or macro) of analysis:* Mobility studies have been seen as “an under-theorised research field” (de Haas, 2014, p4) and existing studies in the mobility field are mainly based on micro and macro level analysis. International students’ return or non-return decision process particularly has been mainly investigated through the utilization of a push-pull model, a concept based on the neo-classic approach (Lu et al., 2009). However, the push-model has a number of limitations. For instance, it is simply based on a cost-benefit analysis of individuals and it does not show whether pull or push factors are more decisive in a mobility decision (de Haas, 2008). It is concerned with macro level analysis and places only limited emphasis on determinants at an individual level. Previous studies have investigated only the impact of single pull-push factors on international students’ return or non-return decisions, rather than the interrelation between them (Han et al., 2015). The utilization of only one level of analysis does not provide a complete explanation for micro and macro influential factors (Goss and Linguist, 1995; Wolfel, 2005). To understand the mobility process requires both structural (macro) and agency (micro) analysis (Favell et al., 2007).

*The second shortcoming is that earlier studies have failed to explain how development (both at national and individual level) affects mobility and have overlooked capabilities and aspirations of individuals in the mobility process:* Mobility theories, particularly the neo-classic and the push and pull model, assume that mobility occurs from poorer areas to richer areas because an individual seeks to maximize his/her financial well-being and in the process escape poverty (Suoglu, 2012; de Haas, 2014). Consequently, development, or, in other words, decreasing economic disparities between countries is seen as the main tool to reduce migration (Andersen and Keith, 2014). Nevertheless, most mobility to the richest countries does not come from the poorest countries but from middle-income developing countries (Suoglu, 2012). Unlike, the existing assumptions of traditional mobility

theories, development in society (from economic to educational) does not necessarily reduce mobility but actually increases individuals' aspirations and leads to increasing mobility capability and aspirations (de Haas, 2014; Anderson and Keith, 2014; Schevel, 2015). For instance, education does not only increase the skills and knowledge of individuals but also individuals' awareness of alternative life styles. Consequently, higher education can lead to increased aspirations to mobility (de Haas, 2014). This is supported by evidence that qualified people are freer to move in comparison to unqualified people (Smith and Favell, 2006). Therefore, mobility theories have failed to explain why individuals become more mobile when development at individual (e.g. gaining a better education) and national (e.g. improvement in GDP) levels occur (de Haas, 2014). The question of "Why development is often associated with more, instead of, less migration?" (Anderson and Keith, 2014, p1) is still unexplored in the literature.

Thus theoretical and conceptual discussion around Structuration Theory and the Capability Approach allows this research to fill the theoretical gap in contemporary mobility studies. The theoretical background of this research draws on 1) *Structuration Theory* that seeks to bring both structure (macro) and agency (micro) level factors and the relationship between these two into one framework (Goss and Linguist, 1995; Wolfel, 2005; Akcapar, 2006). The application of Structuration Theory will allow us to see how international students' return or non-return plans to Turkey are shaped by social determinants at micro, meso and macro levels, as well as to give an insight into how the interactions between these three level factors occur 2) *Capability Approach*; interprets mobility as a function of individuals' aspirations and capabilities within a number of given opportunity structures by underlining how increasing capabilities mean increasing aspirations (de Haas, 2014). It enables us to go beyond a neo-classic economic macro level approach (Cenci, 2015).

The framework is created through the application of structuration theory and capability approach. It defines international students' mobility as PhD students' capability (freedom) to choose where to live and work after completing a PhD degree, including the option of staying abroad (in the UK or moving to a third country) or returning to Turkey within a given set of structures that enhance and constrain their capability for mobility. (Structure, agency and meso factors are identified, that are based on the main findings of earlier studies). First, in relation to Structuration Theory, it will be shown how the return/non return plans of students are affected by structure (macro) factors, agency (micro) factors and meso level factors. Secondly, in relation to the Capability Approach, how these factors at macro, meso and micro levels impact to enhance or constrain international students' capabilities and whether or not studying abroad develops their capabilities in such a way as to enhance their mobility will be evaluated. Consequently, a student's return or non-return plans will be classified as revealing a plan for returning and non-returning to Turkey or a plan for non-returning to Turkey with insufficient capability.

### **Research Philosophy and methods**

Taking a qualitative method underpinned by Interpretivist research philosophy, whereby the social actor plays a crucial role (Saunders et al., 2012), the findings will be generated through interactive dialogue between the researcher and the participant as well as through interpretation (Ponterotto, 2005). A purposive sampling method will be applied to achieve a balanced selection of participants based on variables such as gender, age, field of study, year of study, marital status, funding source and ethnicity. The proposed sample size is 40. The methods of selecting participants will be for instance universities' websites and conferences / seminars. Participants will be selected to start with by using universities' websites. Semi-structural interviews will be conducted in September and October 2016 in the Turkish language, so allowing interviewees to express themselves comfortably and avoid language bias (Song and Parker, 1995; Gold and Nawyn, 2013). Each interview will take approximately 1 hour and an interview venue will be chosen by the interviewee. Open-ended questions will be used, which allow the participants to express their points of view and experiences freely (Turner, 2010). Digital audio recording will be used to improve the accuracy of transcription (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Data will be analysed through Nvivo software.

#### *Pilot Study*

A pilot study has been conducted with five students in order to test the adequacy of the interview questions and the chosen research method. Namely we explored that firstly, apart from one student, three are planning to stay in the UK and one is planning to go to a third country. Secondly, there are different factors at macro, micro and meso levels that play a role in students' return or non-return plans, including political, life-style and professional factors. Factors behind the mobility of students vary according to gender and their field of study (e.g. female students have a greater family concerns than males). Thirdly, capability has a significant role in future mobility plans to the extent that the desire to study to study abroad alone is not enough to achieve mobility without other factors being present, such as the existence of a cosmopolitan outlook and intercultural communication skills. Fourthly, concern about the future of Turkey was often cited; the anti-democratic practices, the current conflict between the Turkish and the Kurdish population together with freedom of speech in and out of academia were considered as the main factors influencing return to Turkey. Lastly, students often underlined the host country's native population perceptions towards foreigners as a significant factor in their return or non-return plans to Turkey. The pilot study's findings suggest further investigation of the political situation in Turkey and the UK; the impact of academic freedom on mobility in particular needs to be focused upon.

#### **Potential Contribution**

*The original contribution to knowledge will be through its recognition of the impact of capability on international students' mobility and its' investigation of PhD students from Turkey.* Whilst a limited number of studies have attempted to investigate the mobility of either students or highly qualified professionals from Turkey mobility (e.g. Gungor and Tansel, 2003), none has –as proposed here– focused on how their capability impacts on their mobility behaviors in terms of their

return and non-return plans to Turkey. Earlier studies have also not focused on students and professionals from Turkey in the UK (Thomson et al., 2008), being rather conducted in the USA (Oguzkan, 1975; Güngör and Tansel, 2003) or in Germany (Sunata, 2011; Süoğlu, 2012; Aydın, 2014) using mainly quantitative data. Nevertheless, the factors affecting student mobility are highly differentiated according to destination country; therefore, the value of this study is in identifying a particular constellation of factors applicable to the PhD students from Turkey in the UK.

*The theoretical contribution is the development of a new framework for international student mobility drawing upon Giddens' Structuration Theory and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach.* Existing literature on student mobility has been mainly based on a neo-classical theoretical approach. This research proposes a new theoretical framework by integrating structuration theory and the capability approach and aiming to overcome the shortcomings of a neo-classical economic approach to mobility and to evaluate the importance of the capability factor without ignoring the impact of micro (agency) and macro (structure) factors on mobility. This will extend the debate on international mobility beyond an economic perspective and it will provide an insight into political, social and cultural aspects behind the mobility by considering both the diversity of individuals (e.g. gender) and the multiple motivation factors (from instrumental to intrinsic values) behind mobility behaviour. Additionally, although some studies have applied Structuration Theory (e.g. Richmond, 1993; Healey, 2010), whilst others have recently adopted the Capability Approach (e.g. de Haas, 2014; Cenci, 2015; Schevel, 2015); structuration theory together with the capability approach has been utilized only by Briones (2013), none of these as proposed in this study have been applied either to highly qualified individuals' mobility or international student mobility, as studies have instead been on low-qualified mobility.

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