

# **Non-EU International Students' Decision to Return through Labour Market Participation: A Qualitative Interview Analysis based on the Intersectionality of Nationality and Class.**

**Özden Bulutbeyaz, M.A.**

This study investigates the subject of international student migration, with a focus on non-EU nationals who have migrated to Berlin, Germany. The study highlights a research gap and a research approach that offers an insight into international migration, focusing on student migration. The nature of the student migration experience and how their decision to return is shaped is the main concept of this thesis.

The research question which shaped this study is “To what extent do the experiences of non-EU international students in the German labour market affect their decision to return?”. The research question was narrowed down into the sub-question of “What roles do nationality and social class play regarding their experiences?”.

The inquiry was framed to explore the experiences of international students from non-EU countries and their decision to return, if applicable, to their home countries. Within this study, the intersectionality of nationality and social class and their effects are explored. The primary objectives of this study are: 1) to identify the experiences of various non-EU student nationals in the German labour market, 2) to use this experience to consider if their social class and nationality affected this experience, 3) and see if their decision to return is related to this intersectionality. The study utilises qualitative interviews as its method.

## **Theoretical Background**

To provide a short theoretical framework for this study, Raghuram's (2013) work is crucial in outlining a new era of student migration research. Her paper, together with King (2013), provides an insight into future directions of student migration. In both papers, the authors theorise student migration as well as offering potential future directions for possible research areas. For this study, Crenshaw's (1989) work, which provides a classic overview of the intersectionality principle, is also influential. The need for this different perspective in the literature, which this thesis attempts to provide, is due to the fact that the current student migration literature has not yet covered the concept of 'intersectionality'.

Choosing Germany as its case study is also important to this study. The importance lies on the research focus of the existing literature on student migration, as it currently tends to be

examples from the United States of America such as Lee and Rice's (2007) or from the United Kingdom such as Sumption (2022).

In existing literature, Germany's student migration research is often taken as a single entity, defined by the labour market and return migration. For Germany, there is a gap in intersectionality research in student migration. Furthermore, research on the labour market as well as the return migration perspective tends to overlook the integration aspect of international students. In this study, the research question is designed to explore the intersectional identities of international students from non-EU countries while looking at their labour market participation and return decisions. In terms of return decisions, in the German example of this study, the difference between EU and non-EU countries while researching international students are also considered.

### **Methods and Research Design**

The main intention of the research was to examine different experiences of international students in labour market participation, and to see if this impacted their decision to return or remain by considering the intersection of nationality and class. In order to do this, coded data was divided into four main sub-sections; the choice of Berlin, student's human capital, their decision to Return or Stay and their experience in the job market.

The main methodology of the study is qualitative interviews which have been conducted with various non-EU citizens. While using a semi-structured schema, interviewees were chosen on the basis of their country of origin and their working experience in Berlin. In accordance with the research design, the students selected were non-EU citizens, doing their Master's studies at Berlin universities (also residing in Berlin), who are also participating in the German labour market in Berlin. The job options of the participants vary, some are working students (Werk student) at scientific research institutions, some are mini-job holders at a university, some are mentors at a university, and some work in commercial sector, such as supermarkets. Students' age range is between 25-30 years old, and out of 9 students, 2 are males, 7 are females. Participants come from Western Asian countries (Turkey, Israel, Iran), Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan), North Africa (Egypt), and East Asia (China). All but one participants study at Freie Universität Berlin as only the participant from Israel studies at Technische Universität.

The primary focus of the questionnaire is to find out if there is an interrelation in the individuals' choice to decide to come to Berlin, or if the choices are more geared towards individual situations. The human capital of the participants is investigated in terms of their

relation to the city, university, classes, social networks, etc. Another factor that was considered is their experiences relating to job searching, their experiences in the job market, whether they faced discrimination or other kinds of challenges during or after employment.

The interview responses were considered in the following sections: Berlin as a choice, Human Capital: Building and Expansion, From Human Capital to Job Search, Income as Stability, Discrimination Experiences, Specific Obstacles Faced by Non-EU Nationals and the Decision to Return.

### **Discussion of the findings.**

The findings of the interviews are that the experiences of non-EU international students regarding the German labour market are diverse, and their intentions to return or remain vary.

One common factor in choosing Berlin amongst the students was the ‘internationalisation’ of their university as well as the city itself, such as their university having a good ranking on the world stage. Berlin as the destination of the students is important, because it has different social and cultural infrastructures, such as a large workforce (Massey et al., 1993).

The responses also indicated that having a job and financial stability helps students to pay for their study and living expenses (Bijwaard and Wang, 2016). The emphasis on “covering the basics” in the interviews indicated that different non-EU country of origins faced a similar issue with affordability when studying.

Many students reported that their human capital, and thus, their ability to find a job, is dependent on their skills, and especially their language skills. “Language is the most common skill asked of migrants,” says Raghuram (2013: 140). Language skills are an integral part of the integration process. Knowing a language can facilitate a better job opportunity, and as research shows, language skills can determine the level of integration into the host society.

In this research, international students also face the hardship of mastering the German language. Phan (2012) argues that it can be harder to master the German language depending on an individual’s country of origin. While some international students in this research encountered problems with German skills, others did not. Discrimination based on language skills is not only related to being a student. Here, the skills of a person due to their human capital are important. Individuals’ own motivation to further their skills in a specific language can be based on their own future decisions, or due to other circumstances, such as staying in a country and learning the language. Furthermore, Adler (2019) talks about “languages” in

Germany and how each language is perceived as “liked” and “disliked”. Languages that are liked by Germans tend to be European and neighbouring countries’ languages, whereas disliked languages were often from non-EU countries that had a high immigrant population in Germany. As language appears as one of the most reported topics in this research, should be the subject of further research.

Push and pull factors of migration were also evident in student’s responses. In this study the experiences of international students are part of a paradox of discrimination towards educated migrants. Their reports of silent judgments in terms of their work performance, asking questions, and making mistakes form part of their integration experiences. Here, the labour market participation among international students and their negative experiences can be considered depending on the perspective of what should be counted as perceived or actual discrimination

Research on international students’ experience with racism and discrimination is not solely based on appearance or ethnicity. The way a name sounds and the way an individual pronounces the words in a different language and how these are negatively perceived also represent discriminatory experiences. Having a different ethnic background can be one of the many reasons why students may want to return. The discrimination and racism of the international students make the host country less attractive, and students decide to return or choose another country.

Finally, a sense of belonging and family ties were also apparent in this research. As when international students return home, they can feel accepted and there is a sense of belonging in their home country

### **Limitations of the Findings**

This study used qualitative interview methodology with only 9 participants in Master’s degrees studying in Berlin universities. Since most of the students are studying at the Freie Universität Berlin, the research scope mainly reflected on this specific university example. One student from Technische Universität Berlin was only reflected as a means of discrimination experiences. To broaden the scope of this research, different universities of Berlin and Germany need to be researched.

Meanwhile, in this study, gender and age were not taken into consideration when interpreting and analysing the data. While respondents were not chosen by these intersections, these two

parameters remain important factors in the subsequent investigation. In this research, female participants exceeded the male participants in number. In addition to the gender imbalance, due to the small sample size, not all continents were able to be researched. Thus, this project only gives a limited scope of country-based experiences. This creates a confusion of the term 'nationality' and 'ethnicity'. As the research question mainly looked at the 'passport' of the non-EU students, different intersections of so-called biological races were not investigated.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, the research question was formulated to analyse the return decisions of non-EU international students who are currently studying Master's degrees and at the same time participating in the German labour market, with a focus on Berlin. In this study, the main theoretical frameworks were international migration theory, the concept of student migration. Another core principle of this thesis is 'intersectionality', specifically based on nationality and social class, which was explained in relation to student migration. As a methodological tool, qualitative interviews were chosen to analyse the experiences of international students.

As one of the main results, it has been found that the intersectionality of nationality and social class do not necessarily affect the choice of return. Racist and discriminatory experiences were found to be negative, and few of the students expressed a desire to 'return' or move another country. In this case, nationality still played a role, but ethnicity was much more prominent. Being a non-EU citizen implies increased hardship, such as when finding a job. Furthermore, having different ethnic background, such as "Jewish, Asian" etc., were found to experience racist behaviours in the urban life. As these examples contradict the law of the city of Berlin, its 'international' reputation remains prominent as many international students chose the city due to 'international' atmosphere of the city.

In terms of social class, most of the students value the possibilities of the labour market, and specifically the cultural lifestyle of the city of Berlin. But this does not entirely affect their decision to return or stay. Remaining in the urban capital city of Berlin was largely reported as favourable, but further options, such as moving to another German city or another country, were also discussed. In this case, the most prominent decision (apart from the impact of racist behaviours) was the participation of labour market and the future prospect(s) of the German welfare state. In relation to this, it was found that some students want to have a comfortable life in their home country, even if they want to temporarily work and find a job in the host

country. Their return decision is, then, dependant on the experiences they had during their stay in their host country.

The intersection of nationality and class, as one of the core perspectives of this study, were not found as expected at the beginning of the research as a means of making a return decision. Rather, the return decision of the international students depends on different parameters. Nationality-wise, discrimination towards students exists, and in some cases leads to students not feeling comfortable living in Berlin.

In terms of social class, apart from the living expenses, students reported enjoying the cultural facilities offered. Here, it was found that some students are likely to stay in the city due to its cultural offerings, but this is not the sole reason. The priority reason why students would like to stay is their labour market participation.

In terms of being a non-EU citizen, students indicate that there are additional hardships, such as income. As the main expectation of the thesis, that the intersectionality of nationality and social class is the reason of returning, was directed towards international students' intentions. In this case, the return decisions depend on different occasions. For example, if a student feels discriminated again or faced racist behaviour, they want to return to their home country or another country than Germany and their country of origin. As a part of the intersectionality, the nationality plays a role in finding a job and getting employed. EU and non-EU regulations of employment, as student(s) indicate, can create an obstacle. As social class forms part of the intersectionality, students enjoy the offers of urban life, while they are being cautious of their spendings due to the limited financial 'freedom' they possess. Further research needs to consider different nationals, as well as different intersections underpinning their reasons to return or remain.