



# The motivations and their conditions which drive students to seek higher education in a foreign country

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## Abstract

This article summarizes a vast literature tracing the plethora of motivations of international students to study abroad. We detail the push factors (i.e., personal goals) and pull factors (i.e., attracting elements) for this decision to pursue higher education overseas. To elaborate, the push factors are around the attainment and/or increase of three main capitals: human, financial and psychological. Pull factors are around the attracting capacity of three main entities: the destination country, the hosting city and the academic institution. Furthermore, the paper highlights the conditions that may enhance or inhibit student mobility for higher education abroad (for example, social networks, transportation accessibility, legal requirements and more). Special reference is given to the mobility of international students in the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords** International students · Motivation · Student mobility · Higher education · COVID-19 · Push–pull model

## Introduction and Background

What makes an individual leave his/her home country, home city, family, friends, familiar environment, only to face uncertainty, challenge, obstacles – “just” to study abroad (i.e., in a foreign country)? The answer to this question may be of interest to many parties, particularly to higher education institutions. One prominent reason is because they international students both pose a substantial (economic) profit source and may contribute professionally after finishing their studies, and as such these institutions are interested in meeting their students' motives in order to attract and preserve them (For elaboration see Shkoler & Rabenu, 2020b). Nevertheless, there has been an exceedingly increasing number of international students worldwide (e.g., McKenna et al., 2017; Shkoler & Rabenu, 2020a; Verbik et al., 2007). To illustrate, according to UNESCO (2022<sup>1</sup>) – in 2017, 5.3 million students studied in countries (in which they

are not citizens); mainly in North America, the United States and Western Europe (3.3 million), but also in Australia and New Zealand (about 430,000) in East Asia (about 440,000) and the rest – elsewhere in the world. Looking at the countries, it is clear that in 2019 the leading countries of *inbound* net flow of internationally mobile students were the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom and Ireland, Russian Federation, Canada, United Arab Emirates, Germany, Japan, France, and Argentina (for further reading, see also OECD, 2013). As the phenomenon becomes more expansive, prevalent and prolific, the motivations for becoming international students are apparently more diverse and nuanced. This necessitates a more educated and refined organization of the knowledge in the academic literature regarding this domain. Nafari et al. (2017) also pointed out the necessity to concern ourselves with the phenomenon of international student mobility:

The growing awareness of students and the fact that they have become more discriminating and demanding in their choice of destination country and institution sheds light on the importance of understanding what the prospective international student's desires and expectations are. (pp. 1-2)

Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis has been hard on many, coercively increasing work outputs for everyone (e.g., Shkoler et al., 2021; Tabak et al., 2021), but also including international students, and it made us reconsider the

<sup>1</sup> It is imperative to note that at the moment of writing this paper, there are no data about the COVID-19 period (i.e., 2020–2021) in UNESCO database.

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motivations and expectations of these students. Serendipitously, the crisis becomes an opportunity to better understand how to cater to these students beyond the crisis itself.

The current paper delves into the many motivations of international students and their boundary conditions that drive students to seek higher education in a foreign country.

## Literature Review

Prior to reading this section and beyond, we kindly invite the reader to review Appendix A in order to be aligned with the key concept of *motivation*.

In essence, there are two main drives that motivate and initiate prospective students' decision-making process to seek higher education abroad – intrinsic and extrinsic. These propel the students' desires onward with an impactful effect on their decision. If so, what motivators and to what extent are they qualitatively different from one another?

The current article capitalizes on the “push–pull” factors model (e.g., Lee, 1966; Wilkins et al., 2012). The model stresses the attraction and pulling capacities of various factors that promote immigration to another country. We discuss this in the context of international student mobility and expand upon it. Specifically, we elaborate and revamp the model into a more contemporary one. Both are explained in details further.

## Reasons for Student Mobility in Seeking Higher Education Abroad

The reasons for choosing a *host country* to study in (internationally) are ample, from culture, cost of living, teaching quality and lifestyle to specific locations, employability options, welcoming nature, even safety reputation and more. The same goes for choosing a *host academic institution* to study in (internationally), from general reputation, campus life, and housing options to student facilities, career outcomes, school's ranking, available programs and more (for further reading, see Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Cubillo et al., 2006; Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a).

Generally speaking, there are two main forces at play: (1) “pull factors” or “where to go”, which attract the student to immigrate to the host country, and (2) “push factors” or “whether to go”, which drive the student to emigrate from the home country (e.g., Giddens et al., 2016; González et al., 2011; Lee, 1966; Wilkins et al., 2012; Zajda, 2015).

These two main forces only generically illustrate the motivations for studying abroad. Moreover, the push pull factors studies is found to be lacking in five main aspects/domains as was deemed by Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a, 2020b (pp. 69–76): (1) there are insubstantial theory and loosely devised research models regarding international student mobility

(meaning, a large share of the academic/research works done in the field of international student mobility ultimately did not process all that accumulated literature and knowledge into falsifiable and measurable hypotheses [e.g., Beine et al., 2014, p.51], as mandatory in most empirical research [Shkoler, 2018]); (2) there are inadequate methodologies (quantitative and qualitative) in these types of research; (3) an issue with selection bias (e.g., only those international students who manage to stay and not drop out of their program are included in research); (4) there is an issue with construct validity (i.e., lack of clarity and unity) regarding the factors affecting international student mobility (meaning, the terminologies and vocabularies used in this field are not unified and coherent, many different scholars use many different terms to describe the same phenomenon, which induces a great deal of confusion into the literature. Additionally, some scholars use factors related to student mobility without giving a clear definition or description as to what they pertain; for further reading see Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a); and (5) there is a cultural bias (e.g., most research is done in the USA and Australia). For further reading, see Rabenu and Shkoler (2020a, 2020b) and Shkoler and Rabenu (2020b).

As such, in the current paper we embark on a modest quest to make a meaningful and insightful contribution by exploring and organizing the motivations behind the decision of prospective students to seek higher education in a foreign country by refining the labels of these two push–pull factors, and enhancing their generalizability. Besides that, we reference to the boundary conditions (moderators) of this push–pull process.

## Category 1 – achieving personal goals (increasing own capital)

This is a paraphrase on the “push factors”. We must stress that, as opposed to mere “travelers”, students have a baseline motivation to engage in a complicated decision-making process during their *pursuit* of higher education (for example, King & Gardiner, 2015; Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a).

Higher cross-border education may be an opportune way to *form* and/or *enhance* an individual's *concept of the self* (Strohming et al., 2017). To elaborate, prospective students need to believe that they would obtain: (i) *human* capital, and/or (ii) *financial* capital, and/or (iii) *psychological* capital – by pursuing higher education abroad (e.g., Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a).

### Human capital

Aptly defined, these are the individual's skills, knowledge and abilities that are usually measured by *education* as well as practical (i.e., “know-how”) experiences (e.g., Felício et al., 2014; Luthans et al., 2004; Luthans & Youssef, 2004). Hence, one way of acquiring human capital is by investing in higher

education. This entails prospective students will want “the best” education they could have, and many times this is to be found in foreign countries (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986; Findlay et al., 2012; Teichler, 2017). In addition of higher education acquisition (i.e., directly), students can also obtain human capital through secondary experiences (i.e., indirectly), for instance: increased proficiency in different languages (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2016; Cubillo et al., 2006; Huong & Cong, 2018; Lewis, 2016; Nathan, 2017; Tantivorakulchai, 2018; Yang, 2007), learning new cultural codes, norms, gestures and more (Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2015). In short, students may increase their human capital by choice (i.e., studying in higher education institution) or by absorbing the (foreign) environment to the best of their abilities and understandings (Huong & Cong, 2018; Lewis, 2016; Tan, 2015).

### Financial capital

Plain and simple, people will engage in higher education because they believe it will net them a better job, better wages/salaries, and higher financial security (it is important to note that their believe is quite rational and evidence based [e.g., Becker, 1964; Card, 1999]). Additionally, another important consideration when deciding on migrating abroad is that the costs (e.g., cost of migration, education) will be much lower than the benefits (e.g., future income) (Beine et al., 2014; González et al., 2011; Huong & Cong, 2018). One of the main mechanisms of attaining this financial capital (and an increase in present value) is by enhancing job (or career) opportunities (this includes meeting mandatory educational commitments for an academic career, in general) (e.g., Cubillo et al., 2006; Huong & Cong, 2018; Lewis, 2016; Varghese, 2008; Yang, 2007). These career/job opportunities may also be augmented and enhanced by both the higher education the student absorbs and by making more and more social networking/capital (e.g., Cubillo et al., 2006; Lewis, 2016; Yang, 2007). These notions align with perceiving a better ROI (return on investment) in the hosting/destination country, as compared with the origin country (for further reading, see Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a).

### Psychological capital (PsyCap)

PsyCap is a positive psychological state characterized by: (1) efficacy (the confidence to take on and put the necessary effort to succeed in challenging tasks); (2) optimism (making a positive attribution/framing about succeeding now and in the future); (3) hope (perseverance toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals in order to succeed); (4) resilience (when faced with adversities or problems, sustaining and bouncing back, and even beyond, to attain success) (Luthans et al., 2015, p. 2). As such, PsyCap is considered as very motivating/driving (Avey et al., 2011; Rabenu & Yaniv,

2017; Rabenu et al., 2016), and may help with the individual’s self-actuation/fulfillment (Avolio & Luthans, 2006; Luthans et al., 2004). In addition to the four core capacities of PsyCap, it has other important aspects, such as: gratitude, emotional intelligence, creativity, flow, authenticity, forgiveness, courage and more (Luthans et al., 2015). Students who seek psychological growth may conclude that seeking higher education abroad is a sound method of reaching that goal (Yakunina et al., 2013). This can be achieved by improving independence, self-efficacy, personal pride, acceptance of ambiguity, experiencing a different culture and/or teaching methods and/or new places, etc. (e.g., Cubillo et al., 2006; Huong & Cong, 2018; Jianvittayakit & Dimanche, 2010; Lewis, 2016; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Nathan, 2017; Tan, 2015; Varghese, 2008). Lastly, in this type of capital, we may also include hedonistic desires (i.e., pleasure fulfillment and sensuous gratification; Schwartz, 2012). Ergo, one of main reason for deciding to study abroad nests in the realization of the prospect’s wishes and fantasies of a freer and more liberal way of life, for instance: living alone (and with less commitments), liberal sex, drinking cultures, traveling opportunities and so on (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2016; Huong & Cong, 2018; Jianvittayakit & Dimanche, 2010; Lewis, 2016; Nathan, 2017; Nghia, 2015; Yang, 2007).

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 crisis has adversely affected the lives and learning habits of international students (among many others). The pandemic, the lockdowns and social isolations have turned, at least part, the international learning experience from a positive and ‘worry-free’ experience to one characterized by risk, isolation and uncertainty (Cairns et al., 2021). This phenomenon might undermine the potential of mobility of international students and induce more immobility (i.e., staying locality). This is because it sabotages the fulfillment/satisfying of the very needs which were the prime driver, to begin with, for international students to travel abroad (Cairns et al., 2021).

### Category 2 – attractors (pulling factors)

‘Internationalization’, as a buzzword, may be perceived as an indicator to quality (Urban & Palmer, 2014) such that international branding is often considered as a proxy or representative of high quality, rendering the word “international” a status symbol (e.g., Knight, 2011). So, there are some interesting and concrete symbolic aspects built into the attractiveness of (1) the *academic institution* itself, (2) the hosting/destination *country*, and (3) hosting/destination *city* that prospective students consider in their decisions to study abroad.

### The hosting country

Most empirical evidence points out that the direction of student mobility is usually from developing countries to

more developed ones (e.g., Kishun, 2011). Interestingly, colonial legacy is another impactful element, as former colonies tend to send students to their former occupiers. For example, African countries (e.g., Kenya and Ghana) tend to “send” students to the UK. North African (e.g., Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) tend to send students to France or Canada (Kishun, 2011; Varghese, 2008). Additionally, recently there is a shift from inbound mobility to the USA and Western Europe to Oceania and Asia (Lee, 2015; Verbik et al., 2007), and even to non-OECD countries (Beine et al., 2014). There are many reasons affecting prospective students’ decision to study at one country or the other, for example: (A) country reputation (e.g., tourism, social, cultural, international, technological); (B) academic reputation; (C) growth/stability levels (e.g., unemployment rates, economic, political); (D) general cost of living; (E) opportunity to work part-time during studies; (F) job opportunities in the future; (G) security and safety (this includes racial, sexual orientation or religious discrimination, and in the current COVID-19 pandemic in might also include parameters, such as: percentage of COVID-positive patients and proportion of vaccinated populations); (H) exotic or exciting attraction and/or touristic opportunities; (I) appealing climate (e.g., vibrant student scene, relaxing or boring climate, friendly locals, comfortable or similar weather to home country); (J) facilities and infrastructure; (K) value of origin currency in destination country; (L) information regarding the country as derived from different sources (hard-copy, virtual/online and/or mass media, like the TV and news or the internet) (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2016; Huong & Cong, 2018; Kishun, 2011; Nathan, 2017; Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a; Varghese, 2008). Furthermore, governments and regulations may also purposely create more incentives and invest in out-marketing, such as education hubs (e.g., Knight, 2015; Knight & Morshidi, 2011), increasing national reputation (e.g., Lomer et al., 2018), and other incentive policies and encouragements in order to pull and attract foreign students to their ranks (e.g., Becker & Kolster, 2012; Nathan, 2017).

### The hosting academic institution

Most prominently, an institution’s reputation is one of its biggest attracting characteristics (Ahmad et al., 2016; Beine et al., 2014; Heffernan et al., 2018; Lee, 2015; Nathan, 2017; Wilkins et al., 2012). As such, from a motivational perspective, studying in an institution that is favorably-ranked can help with meeting students’ needs for self-enhancement and self-esteem/image (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Knight, 2011; Maslow, 1943). Also, Heffernan et al. (2018) outline the importance of institutions’ rank and reputation, as components that contribute to building students’ trust in that institution. It is, thus, a simple equation for international students: the higher the academic institution’s rank, the more

attractive it and the country it is situated in get (Lee, 2015, p. 105), as ranking often represents quality (see Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a). In essence, typical indicators the ranking of an academic institution exist (for further reading, see Johnes, 2018). Such sources (e.g., World University Rankings, Quacquarelli Symonds, Academic Ranking of World Universities, etc.) collect and calculate the rankings of universities to comprise a single comparable indicator (ranking) of quality. This “grade” indicator is then utilized by governments, academics and scholars, university managers, prospective students, alumni, and more, even though the system is far from being perfect (e.g., Johnes, 2018; Perez-Esparrells & Orduna-Malea, 2018). As mentioned before, internationalization has been increasing in frequency, prevalence, and impact (e.g., Knight, 2011). As a byproduct, some of the ranking sources have begun including an ‘international indicator’ in their ranking calculations. For instance, World University Rankings (Times Higher Education, 2018) has begun incorporating this essential criterion (i.e., “*international outlook*”), which combines (1) the proportion of international students at the university; (2) the number of international faculty members; and (3) journal publications that are peer-reviewed, with a *minimum of one* international co-author. To exemplify the significance of this relatively new indicator, it accounts for roughly a quarter (25%) of the total-ranking-score of that academic institution (Perez-Esparrells & Orduna-Malea, 2018).

Notwithstanding that the rank and prestige are of paramount importance, there are other, equally as relevant, factors that students consider when choosing to study abroad. Such as: (A) degrees or diplomas that are academically recognizable (and their also marketability); (B) satisfaction with the communication and administrative staff at the institutional and; (C) quality of faculty members (e.g., research reputation, expertise and experience, etc.); (D) atmosphere at campus; (E) perceived safety and security at the institution (e.g., discrimination levels, theft and other crime rates, etc.); (F) institution’s financial stability; (G) resources and facilities (e.g., quiet areas for studying, library, technology, sports, etc.); (H) easier admissions (e.g., recognition of previous qualifications, facilitated admission processes, etc.); (I) relationship between home and destination institutions (e.g., shared programs or funds, accreditation systems, strategic alliances, etc.); (J) expenses that go beyond tuitions (e.g., printing or copying, dormitories, cafeteria/Mensa, other life expenses, etc.); (K) considerations in favor of public vs. private institutions; (L) job or employment opportunities at the campus (e.g., lecturing, teaching or research assistantship, laboratories, etc.); (M) alumni (strength, size, recommendations, quality, etc.); (N) information about the institution (i.e., hard-copy, virtual/online, and social media sources, such as: Facebook, Twitter, advertisements); (O) actions taken by the institution (e.g., marketing attempts)

(e.g., Ahmad et al., 2016; Becker & Kolster, 2012; Bolsmann & Miller, 2008; Cubillo et al., 2006; Eder et al., 2010; Huong & Cong, 2018; Lewis, 2016; Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a).

In addition to the influence of the institution, students also consider factors related to the *programs* offered in the institutions (Aarinen, 2012; Cubillo et al., 2006; Hildén, 2011; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mikalayeva, 2015; Tantivorakulchai, 2018). For example: (A) international recognition of the program; (B) program, specialization, flexibility, suitability, availability, and diversity (e.g., morning vs. evening courses, variety of courses, concentrated and shorter programs, summer semesters, etc.); (C) the program's quality; (D) recognition by future employers; (E) tuition fees and total costs; (F) financial aides (e.g., loans, scholarships, subsidies, stipends, grants and funds) (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2016; Becker & Kolster, 2012; Cubillo et al., 2006; Huong & Cong, 2018; Lewis, 2016; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Nathan, 2017; Nghia, 2015; Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a; Tan, 2015; Yang, 2007).

### The hosting city

Yes, the hosting city, while not as strong a factor, is also an important element to the decision of studying abroad. The city is an inseparable element from the country and the institutions, as choosing one or the other entails choosing a city as well. It is important to note, however, that although the city is a considerable element in the choice to study abroad, the impact that the country and the academic institution have on this decision are superior (Mikalayeva, 2015).

Factually, every city differs from another in their cost of living and affordability (e.g., food/drink, housing and renting, personal care items, etc.) (Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a). An illustrative example: a prospective student decides to study in *Israel*. They may choose between six different universities (in six different cities, spread across the country). On the one hand, should the student decide to study in Tel Aviv (i.e., TAU; Tel Aviv University), they will face significantly higher renting and living costs (for example) than by studying in Beer-Sheva (i.e., Ben-Gurion University) (see Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017). We, therefore, deem the city as an important pull factor. The city's attracting properties are, for example: (A) city dimensions (e.g., demographical growth/decline, physical characteristics, etc.); (B) local ambiance and climate; (C) language (dis)similarity; (D) security and safety (including racial, sexual orientation and/or religious discrimination); (E) facilities (e.g., sports, social, etc.); (F) opportunities for jobs and employment; (G) international environment; (H) physical environment surrounding the university; (I) academic reputation; (J) information about the institution (i.e., hard-copy, virtual/online, and social media sources, such as: Facebook, Twitter, advertisements) (e.g., Aarinen, 2012;

Becker & Kolster, 2012; Cubillo et al., 2006; Jianvittayakit & Dimanche, 2010; Mikalayeva, 2015; Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a).

### Category 3 – boundary conditions (moderators)

The motivations to achieve our personal goals may be driving us (category 1, above), and we may be attracted by various attractive (pulling) factors (of institution, country and/or city; category 2, above). Nevertheless, there are still forces (sometimes beyond our control, like a global pandemic) that might intercede the decision to seek higher education abroad, in a foreign place. Such forces may be *internal* (e.g., psychological resources, language proficiency, etc.) or *external* (e.g., political affiliations, visa regulations, recommendations or criticisms, etc.). These can either constrain and inhibit, or support and enhance the decision to study abroad. They do not initiate, push or pull us to make the decision, but have an effect on the process itself. Statistically, such factors are called *moderators*; however, since this is a theoretical review article, we will use a name that linguistically symbolizes their role better – they condition the mobility of international students, thus, we dub them as *conditioning* elements (see Appendix in Shkoler et al. (2017) for further reading and clarification.). We identified 9 prominent examples for such conditional factors.

#### Formal and legal requirements

When making a decision regarding studying abroad, students generally consider the intensity and prevalence of formal and/or legal factors. For example: (A) obtaining higher education at home is more difficult (e.g., admissions, difficulty in gaining entry, programs unavailable, fees, etc.); (B) legal procedures in the destination country (e.g., immigration legislation, visa, etc.); (C) admissions at the destination institute (e.g., recognition of previous qualifications, easier processes, etc.); and more (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2016; Becker & Kolster, 2012; Cubillo et al., 2006; Huong & Cong, 2018; Jianvittayakit & Dimanche, 2010; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a; Tan, 2015; Wilkins et al., 2012; Yang, 2007).

#### Social resources

Students may potentially acquire and benefit from social resources (e.g., social networks) in the form of social support. Migrants often offer assistance to students (who are from their own country) and tend to share information with them as well. Therefore, social networks may reduce migration costs and facilitate assimilation in the destination country for the international student (Beine et al., 2014). Additionally, family (either close or distant) may also provide critical and needed support for the student (e.g., emotionally, physically,

financially, etc.); this is also true for the student's acquaintances/friends (e.g., Becker & Kolster, 2012; Jon et al., 2014; Lewis, 2016; Li & Bray, 2007; Nghia, 2015; Tan, 2015).

### Psychological resources

By and large, adversities and challenges are prevalent in any migration maneuver, and, as such, international students might very well face uncertainties, ambiguities, stress (Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013), off- and -on campus bias/discrimination, hostility (Yan & Pei, 2018), loneliness and social isolation (Lee, 2015; Sawir et al., 2008), that permeated our lives and became even harder during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cairns et al., 2021; Malet Calvo et al., 2021). Such hardships may even drive the students to question their own social identity (Glass et al., 2015; Yakunina et al., 2013). Evidently, psychological resources (e.g., Psy-Cap) are essential part of mobility and coping with relocations (Kosic et al., 2004; Meshulam & Harpaz, 2015; Ramelli et al., 2013). Furthermore, these resources seem to have an impact on coping with stress, on acculturation, and on the adaptation of international students (e.g., Kashima et al., 2017; Mak et al., 2015; Wang, 2009; Yakunina et al., 2013).

### Financial reservoirs

An increase in wealth levels at households can be identified, which facilitates the payment for tuition fees and traveling expenses (Verbik et al., 2007), and this allows students to be able to pay baseline tuitions, otherwise studying abroad would be rendered impossible from the get-go. However, over the years, international students pay higher tuition fees than domestic students (Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a). Ergo, the financial capacity of a student is pivotal, in this regard. This will reflect the students' ability to pay for various things such as tuition fees, food, public transportation, and so on. The financial reserves can derive from the student's own savings or from his/her family. This is an important factor as tuition fees and living costs are a very influential in deciding to study abroad (e.g., Becker & Kolster, 2012; Beine et al., 2014; Huong & Cong, 2018; Lewis, 2016; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Rhein, 2017). Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic the financial concerns became more substantial, as many international students experienced difficulties in meeting tuition payments. Undergraduates, especially, relied on precarious, unsafe and/or part time jobs in order to cover the cost of their tuitions (e.g., Malet Calvo et al., 2021). Precarious work often includes employees in contingent and/or alternative work arrangements (Rabenu, 2021, p.257; Rudolph et al., 2021). During the corona crisis, these workers suffered a higher probability of losing their jobs than employees with stable and permanent work (e.g., Rabenu, 2021; Rudolph et al., 2021). Unfortunately, higher education institutions have not assisted them enough in this crisis situation

(Malet Calvo et al., 2021). It should be noted that these, among other reasons, might become a catalyst that drives individuals to self-harm and worse (e.g., Solano et al., 2016).

### Demographical status

Unfortunately, there is almost no evidence as for the impact of demographical status on the decision to study abroad (Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a). Although family status can have an impact on decision-making for relocation (e.g., marital status and parenthood; Baldrige et al., 2006), gender and other family-related factors had no concrete effect on this decision (Chapa & Wang, 2016; Poyrazli, 2015). Deeper investigation of these relationship is required (for further reading, see Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a, p.97).

### Transportation accessibility

As mentioned, there are more and more students that choose to acquire their higher education abroad. In part, this became possible by the variety of widespread routes and transportation modes that have improved accessibility to higher education institutions around the world (Lee, 2015). Additionally, the availability of transportation between countries and/or within a certain country, the cost of this transportation and the importance of geographical proximity (i.e., home-host countries distance) – all are impactful when deciding to study abroad (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2016; Beine et al., 2014; Huong & Cong, 2018; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a; Tan, 2015). Notably, during COVID-19 pandemic, several new routines, policies and practices were adopted to preserve population health and safety in order to protect, among others, students, lecturers/teachers and other academic staff. Governments restricted overseas flights, especially to countries labeled as having a very high R coefficient (i.e., reproduction/spread rate) (Rabenu, 2021), which, ultimately, had limited students' ability to travel and study in overseas campuses.

### Diplomatic ties/affiliations between home and destination countries

As social creatures, we seek similarities and characteristics we can identify with. Sharing sociohistorical connections and cultural similarities can encourage prospective students to emigrate (meaning, from their own country to another country with similar characteristics, for example: Argentinian and Colombian individuals tend to relocate to Spain for language and citizenship considerations; Lasanowski, 2011). Certain elements contribute to the "feeling of similarity/identification", such as: economic, political, religious, cultural, historical, linguistic, colonial, etc. (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2016; Huong & Cong, 2018; Jon et al., 2014; Kishun, 2011; Nathan, 2017; Varghese, 2008).

## Language barriers or familiarity

The impact of language proficiency on the comfortability a student may feel with relocating to a foreign country is more profound than that of other factors, such as: education, age, marital status, or sex, and it is a crucial part of cultural adaptation (Misra et al., 2003). To elaborate, language barriers can hinder communication, understanding of academic assessments, academic writing, learning in general, and understanding of technical language, (Andrade, 2006; Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018; Cubillo et al., 2006; Lewis, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2015; Yang, 2007). As such language is usually an invaluable asset and a key mobility incentive (Lasanowski, 2011).

## Recommendations or criticisms

Lastly, a noteworthy factor that has the capacity to influence the decision of studying (i.e., higher education) abroad is recommendations by, mostly, significant others (e.g., friends or peers, professors and teachers, family members, consultants or agents, sponsors, ex-students or alumni, etc.; Cubillo et al., 2006; Hildén, 2011; Huong & Cong, 2018; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Santos et al., 2018). Interestingly, it is evident that family can be very important to an individual in several aspects. However, the significance of a friend or another significant-other, who may give a personal opinion regarding an academic institute or country, might be even stronger. In other words, a (good/bad) personal experience is often perceived to be quite compelling and trustworthy (e.g., Gomes & Murphy, 2003; Santos et al., 2018).

## Discussion and Conclusions

As illustrated in the introduction, the current literature summary was set on a modest quest to make a meaningful and insightful contribution by exploring and organizing the motivations behind the decision of prospective students to pursue higher education in another foreign country. To the best of our knowledge, the current article is one of the few pioneering works that tackled the issues of both (A) problematic theory and research models regarding international student mobility and (B) issues with construct validity (i.e., lack of unity and clarity) regarding the factors affecting international student mobility (see also Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a). A clearer and more organized picture of these factors has been illustrated in this study, as presented in the body of the literature review.

That is to say, this study offers an updated and reclassified “push and pull factors”, into two main categories: (1) achieving personal goals (increasing own capital) as a paraphrase on the “push” factors; (2) attractors (pulling factors) as a variation on the “pull” factors. Additionally, it capitalizes on

a new dimension (Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a) that is *boundary conditions* (moderators) which is a category that has eluded most international mobility research. To summarize, *achieving personal goals* revolves around the personal drives (intrinsic or extrinsic) to increase own (a) human, (b) financial and (c) psychological capitals. The *attractors* are the factors that magnet the student to a specific (a) country, (b) academic institution or (c) city. So, these two are the main forces affecting the prospective student *whether* and *where* to seek higher education abroad. However, there are *boundary conditions* that could impact this decision (i.e., inhabit or enhance it). These include: (i) formal and legal requirements; (ii) social resources; (iii) psychological resources; (iv) financial reservoirs; (v) demographical status; (vi) transportation accessibility; (vii) diplomatic ties/affiliations between home and destination countries; (viii) language barriers or familiarity; and (ix) recommendations or criticisms (regarding a country, academic institution or a city).

## Contribution of the Current Paper.

### Theoretical contributions

Research on international students is often qualitative and focuses on students at a particular institution or in a particular destination country or students from a particular country of origin (e.g., students studying in Portugal or Thailand; Indonesian or Indian students, etc.). Indeed, students’ motivations and experiences must be explored with regard to specific and empirical contexts. Nevertheless, there is great value in a comprehensive and integrative understanding of the general motivations of international students.

The current literature has drawn inspiration and information from many researches and researchers whose work contributed to the accumulated knowledge on the international student mobility in higher education research domain (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2016; Cubillo et al., 2006).

Also, in our humble opinion, this study (after Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a) provides a solution to some of the theoretical lacunas of researches in the domain of push–pull factors, by organizing and elaborating the understanding of the reasons to become international students.

### Practical implications

The case of international student mobility is nested in – motivation. Motivation of the student to relocate and study in a foreign country, and motivation of governments and academic institutions to attract these students to their ranks.

*From the perspective of governments and academic institutions.* There are growing numbers of governments and academic institutions that allocate more and more funds for

the sake of improving the quality and quantity of any higher education they provide (Beine et al., 2014; Nathan, 2017), making them more appealing to students at large, and foreign (international) students in particular. Understanding the motivations of international students to study abroad will help institutions and countries steer their efforts in the right direction in order to achieve their goal. For example, based on this research, institutions can build and provide to prospective students to fill a rating form of the motivations to study abroad, based on those we raised in this article (see Appendix B). The answers will enlarge the institution's understanding—what are the leading motivations of international students in their campus and meet their needs more easily and precisely. In this way it will be possible to conserve them and satisfy them and as satisfied customers, they will lead to the applying of more prospective students after them. For further reading, kindly refer to Rabenu and Shkoler (2020b).

*Applicants' and students' perspective.* From the *individual's* perspective, students become more and more conscious, and even judicial, about their decision of where to study (internationally) and the process it entails. They grow more ambitious and their choices do not rely on purely educational outcomes: some prefer a nice scenery and touristic options (e.g., Thailand), a vibrant lifestyle (e.g., a “young” and lively city, like Tel-Aviv), work opportunities, social networking, self-enhancement, self-fulfilment and the list continues (Rabenu & Shkoler, 2020a). As such, it would only be logical to give this notion proper thought and build a support system for students to help them meet their needs. For example, in light of the constraint of financial reserve, especially after the Corona period, institutions must make sure that they allow for better payment arrangements and assistance to international students in finding new precarious jobs.

## Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

This article is conceptual (not a literature review nor empirical study) and therefore has no research findings. More specifically, it delivers no empirical evidence for the classification we proposed nor does it demonstrate the practical effectiveness of the factors we uncovered. This is the first and most limiting aspect of this research. On the other hand, this study is a summary of vast literature. We greatly encourage researchers in the field to make use of our suggestions in devising new and more elaborate research models to explore and scrutinize.

In addition, in his paper we addressed the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected the motivation of international students. However, caution is advised as we, admittedly, relied on only a handful of articles, as research on the subject is still scarce. As such, further investigations are needed to

explore the in-depth and long-term changes that the corona crisis has wrought (e.g., will the motivation of international student to study abroad will weaken due to the coronavirus pandemic? What are the challenges it raised for international students, such as: difficulty in financing studies and greater-than-ever feelings loneliness?).

Last, this paper uses Rabenu and Shkoler's (2020a, 2020b) work as the main reference and source. As such, our current work contributes, as well, to the expansion and elaboration of that integrative knowledge on the motivations of international students, including the COVID-19 pandemic period.

## Appendix 1

### Motivation

Motivation is a concept that accompanies us in virtually everything we do; every behavior we perform has an underlying purposeful drive and intent (For motivation definitions see for example, Baumeister, 2016; Kanfer et al., 2017, p. 339; Pinder, 2008, p. 11). In this context, academic motivation may be defined as “cognitive and noncognitive behaviors demonstrating the desire to achieve academic success” (Mwangi et al., 2016, p. 210).

Motivation is derived from an interaction between individual differences (e.g., personality traits, dispositions and different needs) and the environment or contextual factors (e.g., cultural, societal, work-organizational) (Latham & Pinder, 2005). Moreover, motivation can be typically divided into two main categories – intrinsic vs. extrinsic (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b).

Intrinsic motivation is outlined by feelings of accomplishment, excitement, personal satisfaction and joy, which the individual may absorb both from the processes as well as their results (Bauer et al., 2016; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Legault, 2016). Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, maintains that the individual is driven by external influences, such as: the person's organization, work itself, the environment, peer influence, social norms, reward-seeking, financial needs, family needs, and more. Thus, extrinsic motivation is focused on the utility of the activity rather than the activity itself (see Deci & Ryan, 1985; Legault, 2016). Importantly, these two motivational forces (intrinsic and extrinsic) are mutually independent (Rockmann & Ballinger, 2017).

It should be noted, however, that personality dispositions (e.g., affective temperaments) can tip the scales and drive the individual to act in various manners, from simple endeavors to life-changing actions (e.g., Baldessarini et al., 2017). The current article did not focus on these aspects, but it is imperative to note their contribution and importance with regard to human motivation.



## Appendix 2

### Initial/Basic Prospective (International) Students Needs Survey

Dear student,

We congratulate you for applying to our institution and wish you much success in your academic studies. In order to meet your unique needs as an international student, we attach the following list of motivations that have been found to motivate people in the choice to become international students at a particular academic institution. Please rate them on a scale from 1 to 6 (1 = least interested; 6 = most interested) based on their relevance and interest to you, with reference to this institution.

1. *I am interested in achieving personal goals, to increase my **human** capital (such as: knowledge, skills, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_.*
2. *I am interested in achieving personal goals, to increase my **financial** capital: \_\_\_\_\_.*
3. *I am interested in achieving personal goals, to increase my **psychological** capital (such as: self-confidence, resilience, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_.*
4. *I am interested and attracted by the **country** in which the institution is located: \_\_\_\_\_.*
5. *I am interested and attracted by the **country** in which the institution is located: \_\_\_\_\_.*
6. *I am interested and attracted by the **academic institution** I applied to: \_\_\_\_\_.*

In addition, many international students may experience challenges / possibilities that make it more difficult / easier for them to choose the path they want towards their education. We attach the list of constraints / opportunities. Please rate them on a scale from 1 to 6 (1 = low level/degree/extent; 6 = high level/degree/extent) based on the extent of each in your specific circumstances, with reference to this institution.

1. The extent of formal and legal requirements for your education (such as: ease of visa application, recognition of previous education, the application process, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The extent of your social resources (such as: family, friends, acquaintances or others): \_\_\_\_\_.
3. The extent of your psychological resources (such as: optimism, hope, independence, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Financial reservoirs: \_\_\_\_\_.

5. Transportation accessibility (such as: availability, ease of use, prices, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Diplomatic ties/affiliations between home and destination countries: \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Language barriers or familiarity (the extent of familiarity with the local language in speech, reading and writing): \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Recommendations or criticisms (regarding the country, the city or the academic institution you applied to; by any source, such as: media, relatives, friends, mentors, advisors, professors, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_.

Demographical information, please indicate whether you are:

1. Gender (man / woman / non-binary): \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Age (your current age, in years): \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Marital status (single / married / divorced / widowed): \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Parenthood status (currently a parent / currently NOT a parent): \_\_\_\_\_.
5. Your highest education achieved (incomplete high-school / complete high-school / tertiary or post-secondary education / B.A. / M.A. or above): \_\_\_\_\_.

If you have any additional comments you would like to share with us regarding your needs as an international student, please let us know by writing in the space below:

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**We appreciate and thank you for your cooperation!**

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## Declarations

**Consent for Publication** All authors accept full responsibility for all aspects of the submitted manuscript.

**Ethics Statement** The current article is conceptual and was not based on a survey and was without any manipulation on human subjects.

**Conflict of interest statement** The authors declare no conflict of interest. The authors also declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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