



Examining the Motivations Underlying International Students' Migration Behaviors: the Case of Master's Students in Spain

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the motivations that international graduate students have to either migrate or return home after completing their master's degree in Spain, one of the most important and yet under-researched host countries in the international European education arena. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 63 international students graduated in a business field of a top-tier highly international private university. Through thematic analysis, we extracted 113 themes, 70 from the group that decided to migrate and 43 from the group that decided to return to their home country. These themes were classified under 13 motivation categories, 5 of them being work-related and 8 non-work-related, thus resulting in a 2×2 factor model. Work-related motivations to migrate included the perception of better career opportunities and the desire to work for an ideal company. Salary played a limited role. Non-work-related motivations to migrate included having a global identity, which to our knowledge has not been identified before, and not returning home for political reasons. Work-related motivations for returning included not seeing job opportunities abroad and seeing higher job opportunities in the home country. Non-work-related motivations for returning included the pandemic, personal motivations, and mobility restrictions. Results from this case study bring new insights about the phenomenological motivations of this population for deciding whether to pursue an international career or not and can therefore help professionals like policy makers and career advisors to develop and implement appropriate measures to support their decisions.

Keywords Migration · Motivations · International students · Spain

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Introduction

The increasing internationalization of higher education and the growing mobility and migration of international students in the last decades have become topics of interest (e.g., Seeber et al., 2016). According to the OECD (2022a), the number of international students grew fivefold from 1975 to 2016 and the percentage of international new entrants in master's programs in 2021 was of 21%. More than ever, the job market demands highly specialized international profiles (Dewey & Duff, 2009) and in response to it, higher education institutions invest growing amounts of resources to attract these profiles and to increase their employability.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the migration and non-migration motivations of graduate international students after completing their master's degree in a business field from a top-tier private university in Spain. Master students are different from international students in general in that they are more specialized in a specific field of expertise and are therefore more valued by companies operating in that specific sector. Many countries, particularly in Europe, have developed measures to increase the number of international graduate students and above all to increase their stay rates to satisfy the job market needs generated by declining birth rates, an aging population, and a demand for higher levels of specialization (Caruso & de Wit, 2015; Mathies & Karhunen, 2021).

The case of Spain is of particular interest because it has been an active actor in both sending and hosting international graduate students since the beginning of the trend in the internationalization of higher education (e.g., Pinto, 2022). In the last decade, for example, Spain was the European country who sent and hosted the highest number of students in Europe through the Erasmus mobility program (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2019).

Research has shown that about 15–30% of international students decide to stay in the host country (OECD, 2013), while others choose different destinations, and many others go back to their home countries. Still, the phenomenological motivations underlying these decisions are under-researched. Most investigations have either focused on international students in general (as opposed to graduate international students who have completed a master's degree) or on the migration of international students to very specific countries (e.g., Tamang & Shrestha, 2021).

This study contributes to the literature of motivations underlying international student's migration behaviors by exploring the case of master's students of a top-tier private university in Spain. We present a 2×2 factor model that integrates all work-related and non-work-related motivations for either pursuing an international career or returning to the home country in this specific population.

Literature Review

International Student Migration (ISM) Theory

ISM theory is a line of research integrated in the Human Capital and the Global Migration theories. It lies in the middle of the continuum between education and

general migration and, according to Mathies and Karhunen (2021), it interconnects with the needs and demands of the labor market. It could be labeled as multi-level as it considers multiple actors, and in multiple moments in time. ISM normally takes into consideration the factors that enable or constrain students' mobility agency, also called push-pull factors (e.g., Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Push factors are those characteristics of the home country that motivate an individual to move abroad, and pull factors are those characteristics of the host country that attract the individual.

There have been some theoretical attempts to explain ISM, such as Findlay's (2011) conjunction of the supply and demand-side theories. In the current investigation, we follow the Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) postulation that international students are a *new migratory elite*. She identified a set of distinctive characteristics, including the absence of economic difficulties as reasons to migrate, a young age, and still being in the process of evolution to independence or adulthood (e.g., McManus et al., 2014). Her pioneer study was one of the first qualitative and phenomenological investigations in the area.

The Impact of Globalization in Higher Education: the Case of International Students

Globalization is described as a multidimensional phenomenon (e.g., Yang et al., 2021). According to Friedman (2000), it is the global combination of technologies, nations, and economies in a free market capitalism at an unprecedented level. Globalization has become a key reality in the twenty-first century. It is characterized by a world economy that is increasingly integrated, by new communication and information technologies along with the development of an international knowledge network and the rise of English as the dominant language of scientific communication (Altbach et al., 2009).

In response to this new reality, universities and governments have developed a variety of programs and policies aimed at increasing the internationalization of higher education so that students are better prepared to meet the new challenges brought by globalization (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Stromquist, 2007). Internationalization of higher education therefore mostly translates into changes in the curricula to include, for example, international or global studies and multicultural or intercultural education, and into mobility initiatives such as studying abroad, academic mobility, or education abroad (De Wit, 2002; Knight, 2008).

Higher education institutions understand the value of international students, not only for the labor market but also for their own scores in international rankings. Consequently, education institutions invest heavily in attracting international students (Coffey et al., 2021), implement strategies to boost their employability, such as internships and accreditations with professional associations (e.g., Gribble et al., 2017), and develop capabilities, skills, and competences that are transferable for different international markets (OECD, 2016).

International Students: Mobility Motivations and Global Trends

Because of this new reality, students are also increasingly understanding the value of studying abroad. A recent literature review on international students' mobility

programs (Roy et al., 2019) shows the numerous benefits of this experience. These range from cultural advantages (e.g., development of cultural intelligence, cultural awareness, global mindedness, language skills, cross-cultural communication skills, and intercultural competence) to career advantages (e.g., professional development, perceived employability, broader career choices, helping the transition into an international career, and career success). However, students' motivations to study abroad are not only circumscribed to the advantages of cultural growth and career development. Research shows that students can be motivated by a much broader range of factors such as experiencing personal growth (e.g., becoming more independent, growing as a person, gaining maturity, or learning how to stand on one's own feet), enjoying hedonistic experiences, and many others such as getting away from a stressful situation or escaping day-to-day life (see Anderson & Lawton, 2015; Sánchez et al., 2006; Nyaupane et al., 2011).

An important outcome of these global trends is the increasing number of international students (e.g., Habu, 2000), which more than tripled between 1980 and 2009 (UNESCO, 2011) and is estimated to reach 8 million by 2025 (Number of Internationally Mobile Students, 2017). A majority of international students are enrolled in OECD countries and pursuing a master's degree in career-oriented fields, about one-third in STEM fields of study and another third in business, administration, and law (Choudaha & van Rest, 2018). After the USA, Europe is the second major region of origin of international students, with 782,000 students going abroad to study. A large majority of them (82%) choose to enroll in another European country (Choudaha & van Rest, 2018).

International Master's Students: the Case of Spain as the Host Country

Spain has been a very proactive country regarding the internationalization of higher education. The number of inbound international students started to increase in the 80's, mainly due to cooperation agreements Spain signed with Latin American countries (Mihi-Ramírez, 2016). This trend continued to increase after it joined the European Union in 1986, as it became an active promoter of the Erasmus program. Currently, Spain is the European country that sends and hosts most students as part of their university programs, and one of the most attractive European countries for international students in general and the most relevant for students from Latin America (Levatino et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2016). The number of international students enrolled in higher education degrees in Spain reached 84,424 students in 2021–2022, from which almost 68% were from the European Union and Latin America (Statista, 2022). Most international students (30.5%) come to Spain to do a masters' degree or equivalent (OECD, 2022) and 37% study in private universities (Statista, 2022). But once their education program is completed, what motivates them to stay in Spain and thus start an international working career? Or else, what motivates them to go back to their home countries? Despite the relevance of international students in the Spanish higher education system, little is known about the underlying factors regarding migration decisions.

Migration or Non-migration Motivations of International Students

The migration decisions of international master's students also bear consequences for the labor markets. Those who decide to migrate contribute to the labor pool and competition of the host country, and increase and diversify its population. These students are perceived as a reliable workforce and are a solution to countries with a shortfall of highly skilled workers (e.g., McGill, 2018), so much that many countries promote their employment by granting them work rights visas or permanent residency (e.g., Sá & Sabzalieva, 2017). Those who decide to return to their home country bring back a valuable set of skills and capabilities that can benefit the country's public or private organizations. Whichever direction they decide to take, there is a clear need for countries to have policies in place that support international students' transition from study to work. However, there is still much to be understood about how this transition occurs, which may hinder the capacity of policy makers to implement evidence-based solutions to attract this specialized workforce.

Indeed, Xu (2021) claims that current literature sees this transition as linear, and stereotypes international students as if they are "lifeless figures that constitute graduate employment indicators" (p. 6). Moreover, studies that explore this phenomenon have mostly focused on quantitative data and on descriptive statistics about main countries of origin, of destination, and of staying rates (e.g., Chen et al., 2013). For example, a study shows that more than half of international doctoral graduates in the USA remain in the country after graduation (Gupta et al., 2003). This stay rate is influenced by the area of study (Gupta et al., 2003) and the country of origin (Roh, 2015). Another study shows that in Finland, the higher the degree level, the less likely an international student is to stay (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021). Non-economic factors were found to be the ones most influencing the decision to migrate (Bartolini et al., 2017), and those who are more work-oriented are more prone to move abroad after graduation than those who are more family-oriented (Hercog & van de Laar, 2017). Other migration studies identified a variety of push and pull factors underlying migration decisions of the overall population. For example, marrying a national from the host country, social networks, and the quality of life were found to increase the stay rates (e.g., Arthur & Nunes, 2014; Bijwaard & Wang, 2016). Push factors were related to a previous bad work experience or economic instability in the home country (Güngör & Tansel, 2014).

However, most of this existing research has used surveys to explore migration motivations (e.g., McGill, 2018). This can be a limitation since other potential reasons not included in the surveys are left unexplored. Surveys can be particularly limiting when the population of interest concerns recently graduated international students since they belong to a generation (Gen Y) that has work-related values, attitudes, and beliefs that are very different from previous generations (Jones et al., 2018). Also, surveys may also miss specific context-related factors, which, given the case we study, could include push and pull factors specific to Spain as the host country, or to socio-economic factors given that the study is based on master's students who graduated in a top-tier private university.

The use of inductive qualitative methods may therefore help us uncover these potentially new motivating factors and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the migration intentions of international students after completing their master's degree in a top-tier Spanish university.

Methodology

Procedure and Sample

The study was conducted with a sample of international alumni from a high-ranking Spanish university who had completed a masters' degree in various business fields in the academic year 2020–2021. Our selection criteria included (a) being in work at the time of the interview, (b) not being a Spanish citizen, and (c) not having lived in Spain prior to study there. We applied the maximum variation selection criteria in order to diversify our sample in terms of nationality, migration behavior, and educational background. This method reduces biases that could result in an overrepresentation of certain socio-demographic or migration motivations groups.

We conducted semi-structured interviews via videoconference. We asked participants about the first job they had after completing their master's degree and about the job they had at the time of the interview (in case they had already changed jobs). To gather information of our phenomenon of interest, we inquired about what in general led them to choose those jobs, and what specific factors made them decide to choose to work either in their home country or abroad (whichever was the case).

The interviews were recorded with the authorization of each participant, and then transcribed verbatim. We interviewed a total of 63 participants, 73% of which were male. Each interview had an average duration of 45 min. Ages ranged from 24 to 31 years old ($M = 25.76$, $SD = 1.37$). Participants had completed one of the following five masters: Master in Finance (13), Management (17), Marketing (5), Business Analytics (7), and Innovation and Entrepreneurship (21).

Of the 63 participants, 30 (47%) decided to pursue an international career after graduation, 10 of which (16%) chose to stay in Spain, the host country. The other 33 participants (53%) decided to not pursue an international career after graduation, and thus returned to their home country. Details of the number of individuals per nationality and decision are shown in Table 1.

Method

We used different qualitative analysis techniques. First, content analysis led us to an initial definition of motivation categories from themes that were found in the raw data. Drawing from Grounded Theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), we used constant comparison to either classify themes under existing categories or to create new ones, and observed data saturation as criterion to stop data collection. This process yielded a code with 13 motivation categories, 5 work-related and 8 non-work-related. Finally, two researchers analyzed the data independently to avoid single coder bias, and applied thematic analysis to elicit themes and code them under the existing motivation categories. Codings were then compared, and the interrater reliability computed¹. At first, a reliability of 93.5% was achieved, which showed

¹ $(\text{Number of themes coder A} + \text{number of themes coder B}) / (\text{number of themes both coders coincide in their coding} * 2)$.

Table 1 *N* individuals by country of origin and migration decision

Individuals who pursued an international career		Individuals who returned to their home country	
Country origin	<i>n</i>	Country origin	<i>n</i>
Italy	7	Italy	5
Germany	6	USA	5
France	3	Germany	3
Colombia	2	India	3
Chile-Italy*	1	Switzerland	3
Denmark	1	Belgium	1
France-UK-Australia*	1	Canada	1
Georgia	1	China	1
Lebanon	1	Cyprus	1
Lebanon-Canada*	1	Luxemburg	1
Portugal	1	France	1
Russia	1	Georgia	1
South Africa	1	Greece	1
Sweden	1	Hungary	1
Switzerland	1	Iran	1
USA	1	Portugal	1
		Russia	1
		UK	1
		Ukrain	1
Total	30	Total	33

*Individuals with more than one nationality

a high consistency of judgment. Disagreements were discussed by the two coders until 100% agreement was reached.

Results

Overall, thematic analysis yielded a total of 113 themes, 70 from the group that decided to migrate and 43 from the group that decided to go back to their home country, thus resulting in a 2×2 model of motivating factors for migration decisions (see Fig. 1).

Work-Related Motivations to Pursue an International Career

As shown in Fig. 1, work-related motivations to pursue an international career can be grouped under three categories: salary, ideal company located abroad, and career opportunities.

	Work-related	Non-work-related
Pursue an international career	Salary Ideal company located abroad Career opportunities	New cultural experience Global identity Ideal location Personal development Leave home country
Return to home country	No opportunities abroad Opportunity in the home country	Mobility restrictions Pandemic Personal reasons

Fig. 1 A 2 × 2 model of motivating factors for migration decisions

Salary Although salary has been identified as a very relevant pull factor for immigration (e.g., Koikkalainen, 2011), and is considered in the neo-classical and human capital migration theories as one of the most important motivators, in our study, it was only reported by two participants. More precisely, this motivation was reported by participants that were from two of the European countries that were most affected by the economic crisis (Italy and Portugal). Participants saw salary as a way to increase the hedonic dimension of their international work experience, to make it enjoyable, and to assure a worry-free life.

I wanted to look for international experiences because I know there is a lot more to learn and also because of the salary. I know money doesn't buy happiness, but it is important to have a good quality of life and to enjoy my free time without having to worry with the next bill... (Paola²)

Ideal Company Located Abroad Some participants expressed a strong motivation to work for a specific company after graduation, independently of the role or location. Their conception of ideal company was related to the reputation of the organization.

I had a tennis background and wanted to stay close to sports. I always wanted to work for Nike because it is very international and diverse and the projects are just amazing. I mean ... everyone knows Nike, right? It was my dream. (Peter)

Participants also reported different characteristics of the ideal company.

² All names are fictitious to keep the anonymity of the participants.

I have always preferred international companies because of work culture. I think they value responsibility, work ethic and hard work more than local companies. (John)

All participants who reported this category were from European countries except one, who was from Georgia. More than half (60%) of participants who reported this category also reported the location as a major player influencing their decision to move abroad.

Career Opportunities Another critical pull factor was related to the perception of having more career opportunities abroad. This motivation was mainly influenced by their educational background, as most participants who reported career opportunities as a critical pull factor graduated from an Innovation and Entrepreneurship master's program. Interestingly, apart from one participant who was from South Africa and who also reported the scarce opportunities available in his home country, all other participants were from developed European countries like Germany or France, countries that are abundant in career opportunities. Also interesting is that 75% of respondents ended up migrating to the country where they obtained their master's degree (Spain), 63% were working in medium-sized or family businesses at the time of the interview, and 50% also mentioned the location as a major motivator.

I decided to stay here because there is an international start-up ecosystem and I like that. The master's program introduced me to the start-up world in general and helped me gather important contacts I use to this day. (Ruth)

Non-work-Related Motivations to Pursue an International Career

New Cultural Experiences Having new cultural experiences was an important non-work-related pull factor. Most participants reported that meeting and working with people from different cultures was a very important aspiration. Besides being conscious that the current global scenario increasingly demands the capacity to relate to different cultures, they were also intrinsically motivated to develop this capacity. They described this motivation as tightly linked to internal characteristics and values such as curiosity and respect for diversity.

The opportunity came and I decided to pursue it because I like working with people from different backgrounds. I don't want to stay in Switzerland and only work with Swiss people. (Patrick)

My strength is curiosity and communication with different people and cultures. (Isabella)

Almost 60% of the interviewees who mentioned this category also reported that having a *global identity* was a major motivator for working abroad.

Global Identity Almost half of participants who decided to pursue an international career stated that having a global identity was a decisive factor when deciding to migrate. All participants reported that they had lived in more than two different countries while growing up, and some added that their family's international careers worked as a role model. One participant reported that this global identity was developed by studying in international schools in his home country, and so had been in contact with different cultures.

I studied in 4 different countries and I wanted to pursue that in my career as well. I learn a lot from different cultures, languages and people (Pierre)

My family has international careers, so I was inspired by their example. (Otto)

Although the last motivating factor (i.e., new cultural experiences) may appear highly linked to this one (i.e., global identity), they are clearly distinct in that the former has more to do with learning and development needs, while the latter has to do with the need to continue to live one's full identity.

Ideal Location Deciding to migrate to get to live in a specific location was also mentioned by some participants, all of them were European and had the legal means to live in the country of choice (other European countries) due to the Schengen agreement. There was one interviewee who migrated to a country outside Europe (Israel) but was granted a working visa by the company, who had recruited him in Italy first and later opened this position.

I've never been in the Middle East (...) I was especially interested in Israel because it was outside my comfort zone and a completely different culture and social dynamics (Pietro)

This category was never mentioned alone and was mostly associated with perceptions of positive quality of life in the destination country.

Because I do like the city a lot. Its climate, the people, everything... I enjoy life here! (John)

Overall, personal perceptions of the ideal destination acted as a pull factor, even when the destination was generally perceived as a country with less resources than the country of origin, which was the case of 50% of the participants who reported this motivation (home country was Germany, migrated to Spain).

Personal Development Some participants were motivated by the prospects of personal development, such as acquiring responsibility and gaining independence. Participants reported that the transition to a country where they had no family support made them feel more accountable for their lives and was an important step, or *rite of passage*, to adulthood.

(...) to get out of my comfort zone, living alone and challenge myself. (Andrew)

To live abroad is really rewarding (...) it makes me a better person, more responsible and independent. I don't have my own family so I'm taking this opportunity to build myself and become what I want to be. (Carl)

Personal development has been identified as a motivating factor in previous studies on migration of highly skilled workers, as the act of migration is found to foster self-cultivation (Chiang et al., 2013). It is also interesting to highlight that 50% of participants who reported this category also reported that having new cultural experiences was an important factor.

Leave Home Country Leaving the home country was only mentioned by two participants and was the only push factor reported by those who decided to migrate. In both cases, the reason was political instability. One was Italian, who expressed that the ascension of the far-right in the political arena and corruption were sources of major discomfort. The other was Russian, who claimed that his country was under an authoritarian regime that was undermining civil liberties. Both interviewees reported a perceived social instability caused by the political scenarios.

The current situation in my country is very difficult. There is constant repression and I don't see it improving anytime soon. I can't imagine myself building a life and a family there. It's just too much to accept. I don't think it will ever change. At least not in my lifetime. (Dmitri)

Work-Related Motivations to Return to the Home Country

Two motivation categories are found under this quadrant: no opportunities abroad and opportunity in the home country.

No Opportunities Abroad Participants who reported the lack of perceived opportunities abroad were either looking for very specific positions or had the perception that, outside their home countries, they would be offered positions with low responsibility. They were either from developing countries outside Europe or from European countries that suffered greatly from the economic crisis and were still recovering from it. For example, one participant reported that, in Europe, he would only be able to find junior positions that did not match his expectations:

I was not able to find a job I liked in Europe, I knew what I was capable of and the jobs were not good enough. It was tough in the first months because of social pressure about your future. (Abuzaar)

Others reported that going abroad meant competing with a vast pool of candidates, thus making it harder for them to get the desired job. For example, one participant mentioned:

It was hard because, at the time, I was more concerned with the type of work (strategy consulting) than with the country, and I had no opportunities for internationalization because competition was fierce. Going back to Greece meant not only to work on strategy consultancy but also that I almost got to choose which company I would work for... (Adonis)

Opportunity in the Home Country Many participants reported that returning to their home country was related to concrete job opportunities there. Many mentioned that they never looked anywhere else because they knew the best option for their professional path was at home:

India is my country. It is an awesome place for business. It was easier for me to start my own business in my own city. (Aarav)

We are developing an App that is still in the development and testing phase, so it did make sense to start here in my country, testing small and then scale. (Markov)

Other participants reported that they had submitted multiple job applications, both nationally and internationally, and decided to accept the job that offered the best conditions. In these cases, there was not an a priori plan as to where to work. The choice was purely instrumental and resulted from a personal analysis of the costs and benefits of the available options.

I did not internationalize because I got this offer and it was the best offer. I knew my boss from a previous short-term job I had before the masters, and I knew that the team was super creative and there was a stimulating environment (Ana)

Non-work-Related Motivations to Return to the Home Country

Non-work-related explanations for returning home were classified under three motivation categories: mobility restrictions, pandemic, and personal reasons.

Mobility Restrictions Mobility restrictions have been thoroughly reported in previous studies (e.g., it is well known that students from developed countries, and particularly from European countries, have less restrictions than those from outside EU). For international students, employment-related visa requirements may constitute a major obstacle (Grogger & Hanson, 2015).

It was hard. I tried very diligently to get into the EU start-up ecosystem but you need a visa and that was so difficult, especially for start-ups. I wanted to stay in Spain but that wasn't the case so I had to change my expectations. (Louis)

Other factors that restricted the mobility of students were related to external politics:

I wanted to work in international positions. But since Iran is under sanctions I couldn't find a job. (Atieh)

We identified two characteristics that are transversal to all respondents who mentioned this category: they were all from outside Europe, and all would have pursued an international career, had the visa requirement not been an obstacle.

Pandemic The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has bluntly exposed the vulnerability of the global economy (Clibborn & Wright, 2020), causing massive job losses that were transversal to all industries and sectors. It severely affected the employability of recently graduated students as many companies canceled new recruitment processes, not only due to cost reduction measures but also due to travel restrictions and overall uncertainty (e.g., Shahriar et al., 2021).

Due to the pandemic. It was really difficult to get a job outside. All processes were exhausting. I sent 2500 applications and got in the final stages in many international companies but wasn't accepted. Mainly because of the pandemic and all the restrictions (Pedro)

There were also participants who felt a lot of uncertainty and had the need to feel safe and therefore preferred to be close to their family in such an exceptional pandemic context.

It was not a decision, it was because of covid. Maybe without the pandemic I would try to find a job in EU. But the pandemic changed everything. I wanted to be near my family. We didn't know what would happen next, or until when the lockdown would last. Be with my family seemed like the safer choice (Peter)

Personal Reasons These were most concerned with not wanting to live far away from the family and friends in their home country. Among our participants, none was married or had family dependents. The motivation to be close to family and friends was therefore intrinsic and not associated to duties or obligations.

It was a personal choice. I went back because of my family, the culture in India is very close, we are very traditional and orthodox. (Arjun)

I chose to start (my career) here because of my girlfriend. We want to move in together and start a family. (Klaus)

Social ties in general have been shown to play a major role in influencing migration intentions of international students. A study by Nghia (2019), for example, reported that almost 50% of their sample wanted to go back to their home country after graduation due to family and social reasons.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to identify the key migration motivators of international master's graduates from a Spanish university. We identified 8 categories of motivators to migrate and 5 categories of motivators to return.

Participants Who Decided to Migrate

We identified 8 categories of motivators to migrate. Those related to work were *salary*, *ideal company* (located abroad), and *career opportunities*. The ones that were not related to work were *global identity*, *new cultural experiences*, *personal development*, *ideal location*, and *leave home country*. Among all of them, only one is a push factor (*leave home country*). Previous studies that applied this terminology also found more pull than push factors to explain migration intentions (e.g., Nghia, 2019).

Within the participants that decided to migrate, 16% decided to stay in Spain, which is concurrent with the statistics provided by OECD (e.g., 2013) about international students that stay in the host country. Two of the common aspects of this sub-sample are (1) their educational background (masters' degree in Innovation and Entrepreneurship), and (2) their seeing *career opportunities* in the host country. The type of master's program plays an important role because learning is substantially through project-based work as students collaborate with local start-ups and family businesses since the beginning of their studies. This connection with the local business ecosystem may be instrumental in shaping participants' perceptions of *career opportunities* in the host country. Consequently, host countries that are looking to boost their stay rates should bridge education and practice through work and collaboration-based learning.

A second interesting finding is that, from the entire sample who decided to migrate, only two mentioned *salary* as a motivator. This was probably related to the privileged nature of our sample, in line with one of the characteristics of the *new migration elite* concept proposed by Murphy-Lejeune (2002): the absence of financial worries.

Third, the fact that the motivation *ideal company* was mostly mentioned by European participants reflects another privilege of living without passport restrictions: to be able to travel freely within a large territory and to be able to choose the employer for its reputation wherever the location is in that territory. There was only one participant who mentioned this category who was from outside Europe. This participant was from Georgia, a country with many agreements with the European Union, which is reflected in the high outbound students' mobility ratio of 6.5%. In fact, the number of Georgian students studying abroad rose from 7200 in 2013 to more than 9700 in 2022 (Study in Europe, 2022).

Regarding the non-work-related motivators to migrate, *global identity* was reported by nearly half of all participants who decided to migrate. Surprisingly, this motivating factor, to our knowledge, was never identified in previous ISM investigations. Having a *global identity* means that the individual has grown up exposed to multiple cultures, be it because of living in multiple countries, studying in international schools, or having parents with international careers. These participants perceive themselves as being part of the world as opposed to a single nation. Koroğlu and Elban (2020) compared it to global citizenship “because of individual’s responsibility towards all humanity in the World, individual appreciation and interest towards others” (p.55). In fact, this appreciation towards others is supported by our finding that 71% of those with a *global identity* were also eager to have new *cultural experiences* as a complementary motivation to migrate. *New cultural experiences* are related to the intrinsic motivation to immerse oneself in a new and different reality, associated with internal characteristics such as curiosity, values such as diversity, and the expectation of receiving something from the experience of living in the host country, including new cultural skills (Cerdin et al., 2013). This category resembles the Bourdieusian notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979), as another dimension of power in society (associated to the economic capital proposed by Marx). In this sense, migrants accumulate cultural capital in order to improve their social status. This is done through the familiarity with the culture of a society, particularly regarding everyday social relations and practices (Sippola et al., 2022).

A second recurrent non-work-related motivator revealed by the study was that of *personal development*, which is characterized by the perception of opportunities to learn from the migration experience and to develop at a personal level through experiencing a higher degree of responsibility and independence. This category is aligned with Murphy’s characterization of the *new migratory elite*, which involves being in transition into adulthood. This transition is marked by the development of capabilities like independence and being able to survive and thrive as an individual in the world. This category is also consistent with previous qualitative studies of migration motivations, which found personal development, or auto-cultivation, to be especially important for young migrants (Chiang et al., 2013).

A third non-work-related motivation to migrate was to live in an *ideal location*, ideal in terms of being associated with a good quality of life and with enhancing the hedonic experience of living abroad. It is interesting to highlight that all individuals who declared to have this motivation were from European Schengen countries and migrated to other Schengen countries, which reflects how not having travel restrictions promotes migration intentions. Also, 50% of these individuals chose as *ideal location* a country with significantly lower development rates, which emphasizes the importance of non-economic features, such as the weather and the overall living experience.

Finally, the participants whose motivation to migrate was to *leave the home country* acknowledged that it was due to political instability. Previous research identified migration as an important response of civilians to perceived political conflicts (e.g., Albert & Hazen, 2005). This finding is consistent with the threat-based decision model, the only theoretical migration decision model that has been empirically tested. It postulates that the decision to migrate due to a perceived conflict occurs when the threat to personal security increases above an acceptable level (e.g., Davenport et al., 2003).

Participants Who Decided to Not Migrate

We identified 5 categories of motivators to return home after graduation. Two related to work: *no opportunities abroad* and *opportunity in the home country*, and 3 not related to work: *personal reasons*, *mobility restrictions*, and the *pandemic*.

Those who reported *no opportunities abroad* believed that the jobs they could have access to outside their home country would be of a lower status and with fewer responsibilities. They also believed that competition in the job market would be less fierce in their home country since they felt they were better prepared than the average candidate, and they believed they had to compete against a smaller pool of candidates for the job. This phenomenon is explained in the school-constraint model, proposed by Rosenzweig et al. (2006), which states that when international students come from countries where the returns on education are higher, they are more likely to return home to reap the rewards of these returns. In fact, all participants who reported this category were either from developing countries outside Europe or from European countries that suffered greatly from the economic crisis and were still recovering from it.

A second work-related motivator for returning home was having good job *opportunities at home*. Two clearly distinct origins of motivation could be identified. Individuals either had an a priori belief that there would be better opportunities at home, and therefore actively looked for jobs in their home country until they found a suitable one, or they had an a posteriori belief that there were better opportunities at home, since after multiple job applications, they got a positive response from a company located in their home country. In either case, individuals attributed finding a job in their home country to better work opportunities there. In this sense, these individuals differ from those who reported *no opportunities abroad* in their locus of control. Those who found an *opportunity in their home country* showed an active agency in returning home and described this decision as positive and desired (i.e., showed a more internal locus of control), whereas those who returned home because of not perceiving good *opportunities abroad* attributed this decision to external and uncontrollable factors such as more competition in the job market (i.e., showed a more external locus of control). It was as if this group was forced to return due to intangible threats that diminished their possibilities to thrive. This could also be related to psychological factors such as lower self-esteem or self-efficacy perceptions. Future research could further explore if these specific psychological traits could predict non-migration intentions.

Regarding the non-work-related categories for those who returned home, we found that the pandemic was the most important motivator in that group. There is already some published work explaining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration dynamics. Among the pandemic-related reasons our participants reported, we found an overall global uncertainty and cancellation of recruitment processes as push factors, and a desire to be close to the family in times of lockdown as a pull factor. Although much research on migration during the pandemic labeled this type of migration as “voluntary returns” (e.g., Menon & Vadakepat, 2020), one should question if the nature of this behavior is indeed voluntary. In the case of our sample, all participants reported that, had it not been for the pandemic, they would have probably looked for a job abroad and pursued an international career.

The other two non-work-related motivations for returning home were mobility restrictions and personal reasons were less frequently mentioned compared to the pandemic. *Mobility restrictions* was only reported by participants from non-European countries. This fact highlights the need to have more policies implemented to facilitate the employment of this population if countries wish to increase the stay rates of international students. Regarding *personal reasons*, this motivator was mostly related to family and friendship ties that participants were not willing to leave behind. This finding was aligned with previous studies that focused on international students and which reported that societal and personal motives were the most relevant motives to return (e.g., Hazen & Alberts, 2006).

Limitations and Future Research

While maximizing variation in the selection criteria (by diversifying our sample in terms of nationality, migration behavior, and educational background) may have helped us capture a wider variety of reasons for migrating or returning home, such a sample selection limits the external validity of our findings, which means that any generalization to the population of international master students in Spain must be made with caution.

First, the sample is limited to students with a master's degree in the fields of business and administration. Future research should replicate similar studies in other fields, such as engineering, languages, humanities, law, or health sciences, and explore, for example, how the different opportunities in their corresponding job markets affect motivations to migrate or return home. Second, the sample does not represent the proportion of students by nationality of the international student population in Spain. While Italy and France (two among the top five countries bringing international students to Spain) are well represented in the sample, the other top three countries are underrepresented (Colombia and China with two and one individual respectively) or just not represented (as is the case of Ecuador). Given that migratory decisions are influenced, in part, by home country factors, future studies could explore how motivations to return home or to pursue an international career vary, for example, among these most relevant nationalities. Third, the underrepresentation of female students in our sample (27% versus above 60% of the total international student population in Spain) also poses a threat to external validity. Future research could also study whether gender impacts migratory decisions, and whether, for example, culture-related aspects regarding gender may explain any potential gender differences.

Finally, our sample comprises students who started their master's degree at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, with Spain experiencing one of the deepest economic recessions among the EU countries because of it, and finished in June 2021 when a great number of countries had just started to witness a gradual easing of restrictions and a gradual return to economic growth. The singularity of this context cannot be overlooked when it comes to the emergence of *mobility restrictions* and *pandemic* as two of the non-work-related factors that motivated people to return home. Future studies may shed light on how the different factors in our two-by-two model evolve and further explain this international student migration phenomenon.

Conclusion

International students decide to migrate or return home for different reasons, often intertwined and associated to factors such as socio-demographic characteristics. In this study, we identified the most relevant categories of motivators for migration or non-migration behaviors of master's graduates from a top-tier private Spanish university. Our findings reveal that staying in the host country was mainly incentivized by the internships during the masters' programs, which connected students with local companies during their studies and somehow generated a perception of *career opportunities* in the host country. The relevance of this factor is indicative of how influential higher education institutions can be for the formation of migration intentions. The study also shows that having a *global identity* is another major migration motivator. Identifying this personal characteristic is important, for example, for career advisors who seek to better understand the profiles of students with a greater propensity to pursue international careers. We also contribute to ISM literature as, to our knowledge, our study is the first to identify *career opportunities* and *global identity*, as relevant motivators for migration. Overall, our findings are relevant to all institutions with an interest in international student's migration behaviors, be they universities, companies, or governmental bodies. Understanding motivations behind migratory behaviors of this valuable workforce is the first step in the design and implementation of policies at various levels to support this population.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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