South Asian students' migration to, within and from Finland and Sweden: connecting the dots to arrivals and departures

ZAIN UL ABDIN

Abdin, Z. U. (2023) South Asian students' migration to, within and from Finland and Sweden: connecting the dots to arrivals and departures. *Fennia* 201(1) 65–78. https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.119776

Much of the current research on international student migration is focused on home-to-host and stay-or-leave migration behaviours. However, there is a possibility that international students might migrate within the host country before making their final stay-or-leave migration decisions. This paper adapts stepwise migration theory as an analytical tool with which to investigate the migration behaviour of Indian and Pakistani students. Based on 57 interviews and extensive participant observation, it analyses the factors that prompt South Asian student migration to, within and, subsequently for some, from Finland and Sweden. The findings support the argument that international student migration is multistage. Initial origin-to-destination migration is often insufficient to meet the high-set ambitions of talented young migrants. Disappointment with perceived missing opportunities in the university city or town lays the basis for subsequent intercity and stay-or-leave migration stages. Subsequent migration within the destination country impacts on the students' stay-or-leave aspirations, while the origin-country situation influences return-or-onward migration decisions.

Keywords: student, migration, Asia, Nordic, intercity, return

Zain Ul Abdin (https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2756-3455), Karelian Institute, University of Eastern Finland, Finland. E-mail: zain.abdin@uef.fi

Introduction

Research on international student migration (ISM) has progressed from only analysing the reasons for students leaving their home country and the factors attracting them to the destination country, to investigating the phenomenon at different stages (Carlson 2013; Geddie 2013; Mosneaga & Winther 2013). Typically, the first stage concerns the students' movement from their country of origin to the destination country, while the second stage focuses on whether they return to their home country or move to another destination (e.g. Tu & Nehring 2020). I argue that there is a third stage in ISM, which involves moving between different locations within the host country before making a final decision on

URN:NBN:fi:tsv-oa119776
DOI: 10.11143/fennia.119776

staying or leaving. There is limited research on the socio-spatial trajectories of international students both before and after they complete their degrees in the destination country (Riaño & Piguet 2016). Examining the patterns of intercity mobility of international students within the destination country, in addition to the origin-to-destination and stay-or-leave stages, can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of ISM.

Much of the current research views migration as an isolated event instead of a process (Carling & Schewel 2018). Multistage migration theories, such as stepwise, transit, serial and onward, feature migration as a process that involves multiple stops of short and long-term duration at various destinations. Stepwise migrants purposefully keep migrating until they reach their preferred destination in a hierarchical manner (Siu 2007; Paul 2011). Onward migrants decide to remigrate to the next country after facing certain experiences, such as disillusionment and racism, in the original migration destination (Ndukwe 2017; Ramos 2018). Serial migrants live in several countries, calling each home at a certain stage in life before moving on to the next (Ossman 2013). Transit migration attenuates mixed flows of temporary migrants, including refugees and labour migrants (Düvell 2008). The present paper utilizes multistage migration theories, specifically stepwise, as analytical tools with which to study the migration patterns of Pakistani and Indian international students in, out of and within Finland and Sweden. Migration research emphasizes examining migration within the context of events that take place before, during and after the move (Kou & Bailey 2014).

To retain skilled workers, many OECD (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) nations are now implementing train-and-retain strategies, such as those observed in Finland and Sweden (Li & Pitkänen 2018; Li 2019). These countries have extended post-graduation job-search permits from one to two years and grant continuous residence permits to incoming non-EU (European Union) students. Finnish and Swedish higher-education institutions – including universities (yliopistot/universitet) and Universities of Applied Sciences/Polytechnics (ammattikorkeakoulut) or University Colleges (högskolor) – offer a wide range of English-taught courses to attract international students. After joining the European Union in 1995, the two Nordic countries increased their English-medium degree programmes to produce knowledge-based economies, as encouraged by the European Union's Lisbon Strategy. As a result, the proportion of foreign students among the total student population in these countries is currently higher than that in the United States (US) (OECD 2022). Although PhD programmes are exempt, Sweden started charging fees for non-EU students in 2011 and Finland followed suit five years later.

Current studies on the mobility patterns of foreign students in Finland and Sweden primarily examine their movement from the home to the host country, as well as their decision to either stay, return or onward migrate (e.g. Li 2019; Mathies & Karhunen 2021). This research paper distinguishes itself by focusing on the internal mobility of Indian and Pakistani students within Finland and Sweden, which occurs after their arrival but before they make a definitive decision regarding their future plans. The primary reason for migrating cited by Pakistani and Indian students is the lack of high-quality educational options in their home country. With a growing youth population and limited course offerings, gaining admission to a reputable university at home is becoming increasingly difficult, resulting in more students applying to higher-ranked universities abroad (Beech 2018; King & Sondhi 2018). However, Perkins and Neumayer (2014) posit that university rankings have a minimal impact on the number of students choosing to study abroad.

The primary goal of international student mobility is often permanent immigration (Marcu 2015). In Finland, approximately 70% of international students continue to reside in the country three years after completing their studies (Mathies & Karhunen 2021). The decision to migrate, including where to study and whether to stay permanently, is significantly influenced by the social networks of the migrants (Brooks & Waters 2010; Van Mol *et al*. 2018). Social facilitation studies have shown that families often invest in their children's future, seeking to improve the family's socio-economic status and sometimes to establish a foundation for future family migration (Sondhi & King 2017). Normative influence studies, on the other hand, have explored the indirect pressures that motivate students to migrate. For example, if students have a successful experience abroad, this can attract future students to the same destination. Cairns and Smyth (2011) discovered that Northern Irish students with friends abroad are twice as likely to migrate to similar destinations.

The objective of this article is to investigate the decision-making processes of Pakistani and Indian students during various stages of their international student migration (ISM) in Finland and Sweden. Specifically, the study examines *what the factors are that prompt South Asian students to migrate to, within and from these countries*, with a focus on how the three stages are connected and why some South Asian students decide to migrate to other cities from their university cities. The article provides an overview of relevant concepts and theories, followed by a description of the data collection and analysis methods in the following two sections. The fourth and fifth sections present empirical evidence on the motivations for migrating to the Nordic countries, patterns of intercity migration and the decision to stay or leave. The article concludes with a discussion of the study's findings and their implications.

Conceptualizing ISM as multistage migration

International student migration (ISM) research typically examines either single-staged or double-staged migration patterns, where the initial home-to-host movement and subsequent stay-return-or-onward migration stages are analysed separately or as a combination of the two (e.g. Hazen & Alberts 2006; King & Sondhi 2018; Li 2019; Liao & Asis 2020; Mathies & Karhunen 2021). This focus on the two stages has emerged as developed countries changed their policies to attract and retain young, talented students to produce knowledge economies and generate revenue from student migration (Findlay 2011; Li 2019). Consequently, research has increasingly focused on how students choose their study destinations and whether they stay in these countries upon graduation or use their degrees to migrate elsewhere. However, there is a possibility that students may also migrate between cities after arriving at their initial host destination but before making a final stay-or-onward-migration decision. In such cases, student migration becomes triple- or multistage. To expose this possibility, the literature on multistage migration is brought into dialogue with ISM studies.

Migration is generally considered and understood as a solitary event that involves moving from country A to country B (Carling & Schewel 2018). Be that as it may, numerous migrants face choices between various pathways at different stages of their journeys. In this vein, recent research has engaged explicitly and theoretically with multiple migration trajectories in order to notify migration as a process rather than an event (Paul 2011; Kou & Bailey 2014). Theories of onward, transit and stepwise multistage migration recognize that migrants may have multiple stops of short- and long-term duration in various countries before reaching their final destination (Paul 2011; Walton-Roberts 2021). In both transit and stepwise migration, migrants generally have a clear idea of their intended final destination (Ahrens *et al*. 2016). Stepwise migration, for example, is a deliberate strategy pursued by migrants with limited resources to work their way towards their desired destination. Due to strict visa restrictions, such migrants are often unable to enter Western countries directly and, instead, move through a hierarchy of countries to reach their final destination (King & Newbold 2007).

The study by Zijlstra (2020) on the stepwise migration of Iranian students highlights the importance of the initial study destinations in shaping students' migration trajectories. Following the designated hierarchical path in stepwise migration, the first stage for Iranian students is typically moving to Turkey, while the second stage is moving from Turkey to a more-desirable destination such as the US or Europe. Students who can afford higher tuition fees often go directly to the US to study, while those with lower economic capital may choose to attend top-ranked private universities in Turkey in a bid to accumulate the capital needed to move on. These students often receive scholarships, research stipends and teaching assistantships, as well as free housing, to add to their economic capital. The opportunities available to students in their initial study destination play a crucial role in their planned stepwise migration to Western countries.

Onward migration theory differs from transit and stepwise migration theories in terms of intentionality. Onward migration theory does not assume that migrants have a predetermined final destination but, rather, that remigration is contingent on the circumstances and opportunities which migrants encounter in their initial destination. For example, African migrants decide to onward migrate to a new country after experiencing disillusionment and racism in their first country of migration (Ndukwe 2017). Indian nursing students pursue multistage pathways between India

and Canada while adhering to Canadian immigration laws (Baas 2019). In the case of Iranian stepwise migration, some students may abandon their plans to move on to Western countries like Germany after experiencing a common language and culture in Turkey (Zijlstra 2020). However, it is unclear whether these students moved between cities in Turkey before making their stay-or-leave migration decisions.

Onward, transit and stepwise multistage migration theories offer different perspectives on how migrants navigate their journeys. However, these theories often overlook the significance of cities as destinations and the translocal networks that migrants form. Examining migration through a translocal lens highlights the complex interplay between the global and local forces that shape the migration experience (Anthias 2012; Ndukwe 2017). Translocal theory encourages the extension of the analytical focus beyond the nation-state and borders on places/cities as migration destinations to bring the *local* back into the discussion (Brickell & Datta 2011; Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013).

Cities in and of themselves are more than just transportation hubs or brief rest stops for migrants. The experience of student migrants is influenced not only by changes in countries but also by the particular cities and neighbourhoods, since university cities provide student migrants with a place to study, work and acquire social capital for creating a life in their new host country (Plöger & Becker 2015). Whereas hospitable or encouraging opportunities, such as the development of translocal networks, may change migrants' feelings of identity and belonging to their new cities, hostile and exclusionary experiences in finding new opportunities or developing such networks while maintaining their original ties to their places of origin may very well drive migrants to seek better opportunities elsewhere (Sassen 2001; Faist 2013).

The act of relocating to a new domestic destination to pursue further education or better job opportunities due to dissatisfaction with the current place of residence indicates that student migration is not restricted to international boundaries only (Raghuram 2013). To properly investigate multi-stage student migration, it is necessary to examine specific cities and locations, in addition to countries, in a single study. International students are particular about the places/cities in which they choose to study because the location of their university degree can improve their chances of finding employment in the host country and the local job market after they have returned (Bilecen & Van Mol 2017).

The emphasis on opportunities in origin and destination cities dates back to the Theory of Mobility, one of the four main theories of migration (Stouffer 1940). According to this hypothesis, migration is influenced by the number of opportunities present in both the current location and the future destination. Migrants are compelled to search for new locations with better chances when they are disappointed by the opportunities they are missing in their current city of residence. Migration is negatively impacted on by the opportunities that exist between the current location and the potential migration destination as well as by the number of migrants competing for these possibilities. In sum, migration is influenced by both the attractiveness of the destination city and the repulsion of the home city.

Even though many international students carefully consider university cities before applying for admission, there has been a lack of focus on cities as migration destinations in the literature on ISM (Van Mol & Ekamper 2016). The quality of life offered by certain university cities is a significant factor that motivates students to choose these cities as study destinations (Prazeres *et al*. 2017). Like the way in which universities are ranked from best to worst, cities are also assessed by students – with, for example, London and Seoul having particular reputations among international students looking for admission. A favoured location can lead to the *place* deciding at which university to study (Nachatar Singh *et al*. 2014). However, once students have arrived, we do not know whether they remain in these cities or move onward.

Student migrants are more likely than other migrants to engage in internal or external mobility when socioeconomically dissatisfied with a particular city (Kou & Bailey 2014; Ndukwe 2017). Poor opportunities make graduates leave their hometowns for cities perceived to be better (Sun *et al*. 2020). A group of educated immigrants who moved to London for its worldwide appeal were dubbed 'cosmopolitan movers' by Ahrens, Kelly and van Liempt (2016). The transnational literature on refugee studies and onward migration shows that work, family, social networks and diversity are all reasons for onward journeys in larger cities (Mulder *et al*. 2020). The literature on translocal theory suggests

that local-to-local relations are one of the key factors in deciding on to which city to move (Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013). The present study aims to underscore the importance of cities in the student migration of Pakistanis and Indians. Its multistage approach aims to understand more complex mobilities at local and international levels as well as the trajectories of students. In addition to contributing to academic research and theory development, studying how students make decisions via the lens of cities and locations is instructive for educational practitioners, regional governments and policymakers alike (Van Mol & Ekamper 2016).

Combining interviews with ethnography

I conducted 57 semi-structured interviews and participant observation to gather detailed information about the experiences of South Asian student migrants. The use of both semi-structured interviews and participant observation in migration research enables researchers to compare and contrast migrants' verbal descriptions of their experiences in their new environment with their observable actions and behaviours (Denzin & Lincon 2005; Kvale & Brinkmann 2015). This comparative analysis helps researchers to gain a more-comprehensive understanding of the significance and relevance of migrants' experiences. I am an international student from South Asia who has been living in Nordic countries for the past decade, giving me significant insight into the life of South Asian students in the region. From January to May 2018, I conducted fieldwork in Stockholm and Gothenburg in Sweden and Helsinki and Turku in Finland. I utilized snowball and random sampling techniques, leveraging my existing contacts to recruit participants. I also had informal conversations with Pakistani and Indian international student communities during the interview period and after the pandemic's deintensifying. I lived with a group of students in flats in Helsinki, Turku and Stockholm and stayed with a Pakistani student in his family's flat in Gothenburg, providing opportunities for informal discussions.

I interviewed 28 Indians and 29 Pakistanis in Finland and Sweden, with equal representation from various cities. I recorded all interviews with the participants' consent and conducted them in Hindi, Urdu, English or Punjabi, based on the interviewee's preference, as I am fluent in all four languages. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded on a secure university-provided laptop for transcription and translation purposes. I use pseudonyms for the names of the 15 female and 42 male respondents and keep the specific cities of residence confidential in order to protect the anonymity of the participants. Although I aimed for a better gender balance among the respondents, as a male researcher working within South Asian cultural norms it was easier to recruit male participants.

The vast majority of respondents came from middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds, while only a few came from an elite class. This background information is significant as international students going to Finland or Sweden must meet certain financial requirements. Respondents, including those from richer backgrounds, worked various jobs to minimize their reliance on their finances while studying. The respondents' ages at the time of the interview ranged from 24 to 45, with a 31-year-old average. They had arrived in Finland and Sweden between the ages of 18 and 39, with a 25-year-old average age on arrival. Between two and 12 years, respondents' stays in Finland or Sweden ranged from two to an average of six years.

Most of the respondents came to Finland and Sweden to pursue Master's degrees, as these are the most common English-taught programmes for international students (Mathies & Karhunen 2021). Nine of the respondents came to study on a one-year Master's programme available only in Sweden. Bachelor's degree programmes in Finnish universities are rarely offered in English (*ibid*.). Among the 57 respondents, only 12 completed their degrees on time, while 23 took longer than expected and 22 had incomplete degrees. A considerable number of those who completed their degrees were pursuing their next degrees, such as PhDs, at the time of the interviews.

The interviews were designed to collect information on migration, remittance-sending and the integration behaviour of Pakistanis and Indians who entered Finland and Sweden as students. The answers were all coded thematically using NVivo software for qualitative analysis (e.g. Schreier 2012). The patterns of multistage migration that emerged through the thematic analysis prompted further exploration of the factors that influenced initial migration and the reasons that encouraged students

to remigrate a second or third time. Meanwhile, reviewing the literature on multistage migration revealed that the current literature on ISM is concentrated on single- or double-stage migration and that research on internal movement is missing, whereas the multistage migration literature lacks depth on the ISM topic. The three stages of migration are described in detail in the following sections.

First stage: choosing Finland and/or Sweden

Students from Pakistan and India gave a variety of explanations for why they decided to study in Finland or Sweden. Pakistanis attributed Finland's and Sweden's success to their home-country's inadequate education systems, their own lack of resources and anxiety about the future. Indians, in contrast, cited stiff competition in the local job market and challenges getting into government universities. Students are forced to explore other practical possibilities since they are frustrated with their inability to get into national universities. The surrounding community provides them with ideas or the social capital to emigrate and families with enough financial resources are able to turn the ideas or social capital generated by the local community into actual decisions to emigrate.

Both Pakistanis and Indians highly regarded the Nordic countries for providing (previously) free education and these students considered obtaining a foreign degree and the possibility of a better future as significant reasons for selecting Finland or Sweden. Pakistani students in Sweden preferred Sweden over the United Kingdom (UK) due to the availability of free education in the past, while Indian students in Finland mentioned specific degree programmes and free education as important factors. Germany and the UK were viewed as the primary competitors of Sweden. Two students, Yawar – (male, 33) from Pakistan and studying in Sweden – and Gaurav – (male, 30) from India and studying in Finland – respectively admitted that:

> A class fellow found free education in Sweden and Finland [...]. We were 20 students in our class. Four–five came in the first attempt. Nine students came to Sweden on a single flight afterwards. Sweden for the reason of free education. The UK rejected our visas because of IELTS [International English Language Testing System]. Sweden also accepted you without IELTS if your prior education was in English at that time.

> Because of free education! Well, I have been living abroad for the last 10 years. I was working in England when I decided that I should continue my studies. So, I was looking at where I could go with minimum expenses. I filtered some options. Finally, ended up with Norway and Finland. So, Norway is a bit more expensive, then I just tried for Finland. [...] Just go for free education! Yeah, that's how I ended up in Finland. 'So, you didn't come from India, you came from the UK?' [interviewer] No, I went back to India and then I sorted out the procedure to come here.

Based on Yawar and Gaurav's cases, it can be inferred that many students preferred Finland and Sweden over the UK because they wanted to avoid high tuition fees and strict admission requirements. The respondents prioritized affordability when considering the feasibility of migrating to another country, rather than university rankings or language barriers. This finding is in line with Perkins and Neumayer's (2014) argument that university rankings have little impact on students' choice of destination. Additionally, the data supports King and Sondhi's (2018) and Beech's (2018) claims that a larger number of young people and limited course options in India influence students' decisions to study at highly ranked foreign universities. The respondents were also frustrated with the overall education system in their home countries and migrated to search for better career opportunities abroad.

During my observations of the participants, I inquired about how they came to know about studying in Finland and Sweden so that I could understand the role of social networks in their decision-making. The respondents frequently cited friends as the most common source of information and their family members also played a significant role in steering them away from more competitive countries like the UK and towards the two Nordic states. Like Yawar, Gaurav also learned about the availability of free education in Finland from a friend. Based on their personal experiences, those who were already studying abroad guided others through messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, suggesting that they prioritize bigger cities with greater job prospects and view universities in smaller towns as a back-up option in case of admission denials or for lower profiled candidates. This finding is consistent with Van Mol and Ekamper's (2016) argument that exchange students are attracted to university

towns in metropolitan areas. However, it is noteworthy that South Asian international degree-seeking students are drawn to larger cities primarily for the sake of better work opportunities rather than, for instance, for a more vibrant social life or a better nightlife.

Yawar's experience aligns with the findings of Cairns and Smyth (2011), who suggest that international students can act as facilitators for others from their home country to study abroad. In Yawar's case, family played an important role in providing financial support for his migration expenses, including flights, rent and board. This is consistent with many studies (including Sondhi & King 2017) which indicate that students often require financial support from their parents to cover the costs of studying abroad. However, unlike other studies that suggest that this investment is intended to support family migration later, this does not seem to be the case for Indian and Pakistani students in the Nordic countries. One reason for this is that Nordic countries like Finland and Sweden only recognise spouses and children as close family members – rather than parents, as in certain English-speaking countries like the UK. This makes it less likely that parents will join their children studying at higher-education institutions in these countries, unless the students are minors.

To summarize, South Asian students were attracted to Finland and Sweden due to the free education and lower English-language requirements. They prioritized feasibility in terms of finances, job opportunities, fees and scholarships over city or university rankings. Social networks played a significant role in helping them to emigrate, with friends providing guidance on the application process and parents providing financial support. The experiences of living in their initial university cities and towns changed, in some cases, after they experienced fewer opportunities. These experiences are discussed in the next subsection.

Second stage: intercity migration

Around half of the respondents received admissions in Helsinki, Turku, Stockholm and Gothenburg and most of them found work opportunities in their university cities. For example, a significant number of students who studied in Turku were able to secure cleaning jobs while studying and a few were able to get a paid PhD position after completing their degrees. On the other hand, the remaining half who could not find jobs in these or the smaller cities where they gained admission, had to migrate between cities to find better job opportunities. Overall, 30 participants reported intercity migration in their pursuit of better job opportunities.

Students moved between cities during and after the completion of their degrees, with many of them moving between cities during the summer break. Seasonal migration patterns were observed more frequently among students from smaller cities in Finland, with a higher number of Indian students following this strategy compared to their Pakistani counterparts. For example, two Indian students named Karan and Arjun would move to Helsinki from smaller cities in Finland during the summer and winter holidays to work, with Karan delivering food and Arjun distributing early-morning newspapers. This strategy was commonly used to accumulate sufficient funds for survival in the following year and to demonstrate the necessary funds for visa extensions. Missing job opportunities in smaller university towns and full-time work permissions during holidays were additional reasons for this type of migration.

After completing their studies, many South Asian students permanently migrated to other cities. In Sweden, this was more common because the one-year Master's degree programme allowed them to leave the university town sooner than in Finland, where the programme lasted two years. Once they completed their courses, they were no longer required to stay in the university town for their thesis. While most permanent intercity migration was driven by economic opportunities and visa extensions, some students also moved to pursue better university degrees, which required switching schools.

Gaurav (male, 30) had lived in the UK and Cyprus for six years before returning to India to pursue higher-education opportunities. He eventually received admission to a university in a smaller town in Finland and used his savings from his time in the UK and Cyprus, as well as some assistance from his family, to cover his expenses to get there. However, upon arriving in the university town, Gaurav found it to be dissatisfying in the following manner:

> It was very difficult to find a job. Some [...] people were there and when I asked for the job, they said like well here only [...] people can work. My savings were running out. I was just hoping for it [job]. My

> friends moved to Turku [...]. I got my university transferred to Turku: a bigger, more-open city with cheaper travel options compared to up north. I got a job there in one week. My life slowly improved.

Gaurav encountered discrimination while searching for a job in the smaller town where he studied. He believed that this was due to another group of foreign students from a specific nationality who already lived there and had established roots. As a result, he decided to follow the example of senior students and moved to another town to seek better opportunities. He stated that he was much happier to have found a part-time job to support his studies in this new city. Moving upon experiencing discrimination matches with Faist's (2013) premise that feelings of being targeted encourage migrants to continue their journeys and with the findings of Ndukwe's (2017) study on African migrants in Finland, which also revealed that discrimination can lead to intercity migration. However, this study suggests that discrimination may not always come from locals, as intense competition for limited job opportunities can turn fellow international students into unfair competitors.

During participant observation, I learned about Jahangir, who came to Finland from Pakistan to pursue a Master's degree in Information Technology. Jahangir had to contact his family in Pakistan to ask for urgent help during his third month when he lost his wallet while cycling back from the library, leaving him unable to cover his living expenses. Meanwhile, his family sent him 1,000 euros with someone who was travelling to Finland to help him out; he started looking for a job to support himself because he knew that 1,000 euros would only last for a couple of months.

Despite his efforts in searching for a job in his university town, Jahangir faced repetitive rejections in response to his job applications, including in the areas of food delivery, cleaning, dishwashing and packaging. A senior Indian student then advised him to visit the cleaning company's office at least once a week and visit the supervisor's house in case his prior method failed. Despite this, Jahangir still struggled to find a job, until a senior student from Pakistan suggested that he apply for jobs in other cities with better opportunities. Jahangir eventually secured an early-morning delivery job in Helsinki and relocated there to gather funds to continue his education later on. This move to a different city in search of better opportunities aligns with the findings of Sun, Pan and He (2020), who suggest that missing opportunities often prompts graduates to move to other towns. This extension of focus to international degree students beyond locals provides an addition to the ISM literature.

The examples of Jahangir, Gaurav and Yawar illustrate the crucial role of social networks in facilitating intercity migration for international students. Greiner and Sakdapolrak's (2013) research supports this, highlighting the significance of social networks with local-to-local relations in guiding and facilitating moves. In the cases of Jahangir and Gaurav, senior Indian and Pakistani students respectively guided them on how to find jobs and to which cities to migrate. In Yawar's case (see first stage), his friend informed him about free education in Sweden and a group of classmates accompanied him to study there. Yawar also relied on his social networks to find temporary work in a distant city before eventually moving to Stockholm to remotely continue his studies. Overall, these examples demonstrate how social networks can be instrumental in helping international students to navigate challenges and opportunities during their time studying abroad. Yawar (male, 33) shared with me that:

> I came for a Master's in Blekinge County. 'Ok, so the summer job you got was also there?' No, it was in Västerås. 'How far is that from there?' From there, Mister, it is about 600 km. 'Ok, ok so you moved there only for the job?' Only for the job, exactly! 'Did it affect your studies?' No, it was summer. It didn't affect me. From there, I directly went back to the university. Resumed studies once again. 'How long did you stay there?' I stayed there for eight months you can assume. Then I moved to Stockholm. Got *Premo* [newspaper delivery job] in Stockholm. The reason for moving here was work. 'Did you finish your studies before moving?' Actually, luckily, I had completed all of my courses. Only the thesis was remaining. So, for this reason, no great effect was exerted on my studies.

In sum, the cases of Yawar, Jahangir and Gaurav show that South Asian students often choose to migrate to the Nordic states due to the limited opportunities in their home countries. The availability of job opportunities in university towns determines whether or not they will move onwards to other cities within the host country. This highlights that employability is a significant factor in attracting international students to certain cities. This adds a nuance to the work of Prazeres and others (2017) and Van Mol and Ekamper (2016) whereby employability is another factor that attracts some

international students to certain cities on top of the quality of city life. South Asian international students preferred the actual feasibility of survival after migrating in terms of prospective job opportunities over nightlife, for example. Those who find it difficult to survive think of moving to either bigger cities or returning/onward migrating. The next section contains findings on this final stage of stay-return-or-onward student migration.

Third stage: stay-or-leave temporalities

Around half of the participants expressed their intention to leave Finland or Sweden in the long run, with reasons ranging from emotional ones to a lack of job opportunities or aspirations for better careers. Some participants who mentioned their plans to move to other countries have now already moved to Switzerland for a higher salary or the US for family reasons and better career opportunities. Others, such as both Rakesh – a male Indian student in Sweden – and Afaf – a female Pakistani student in Finland, who revealed their plans to leave their respective Nordic countries, have not yet left. Rakesh (male, 34) struggled with his two-year Master's degree programme in Computer Science in Kronoberg County and was considering switching to a one-year programme in another town. He said:

> I applied for free education and came here. I applied for jobs during my studies. The problem here is that, if you want to do a professional job, your Swedish level should be very high! [...] I got into a two-year computer science programme [...]. In Kronoberg County, it was a two-year course. I moved to Gothenburg to change to a one-year course. [...] I would like to go to Canada or maybe the US because my girlfriend is there. I would like to move there [...]. Well, she is earning like 10,000 dollars every month. If I go there, I will have a good [job] opportunity.

While Rakesh was planning to onward migrate, most Indian students expressed their desire to return to their home country. They explained that they want to take care of their parents and take advantage of improved career opportunities in India. On the other hand, Pakistani students mainly aspire to onward migrate to another country for better opportunities and wish neither to stay in Finland in the longer term nor return to Pakistan. At this stage, the focus for both Indians and Pakistanis is on finding a regular, well-paid job, which is a stark contrast to the low-paid student jobs at the second intercity mobility stage. For example, Afaf, a 27-year-old female Pakistani student in Finland, who was attracted to study there because of the free education system, plans to onward migrate to Canada to find a regular well-paid job. She came to a city in Lapland in Finland with only 1,500 euros and, like Karan and Arjun (see above), moved to Espoo near Helsinki each summer to work in odd jobs and save money for her studies. After completing her courses in Lapland, she moved to Helsinki to work full-time in a job while waiting to complete her thesis. Her exact words were:

> Studies! Free studies! I would say that I always wanted to have a career abroad. It was basically the biggest motivation [...]. I brought 1,500 euros [...]. Living here wasn't really expensive [...]. I used to work in the summer in Espoo. So, I used to earn maybe 6,000–7,000 euros in three months. So, then I survived on that money for the following year [...] I wouldn't move to Pakistan but I will move from Finland [...] because I went to Canada in the summer last year, so most probably to Canada. Today, I got a job offer from Dubai as well. Perhaps I will go there. I don't know, let's see. But I do want to move because I do not see myself progressing in Finland.

Based on the participants' intentions, it appears that the desire to return migrate is influenced by the employment opportunities in their home country. Indian respondents expressed a greater inclination towards returning to India compared to Pakistani respondents, possibly due to the perceived availability of job opportunities in India. However, those who do plan to return often consider Finland and Sweden as their second homes and wish to maintain their connections with these countries. Zafar, a 38-year-old male Pakistani student in Finland, explained that:

> Finland has a place in our hearts. I missed City X when I went to Pakistan after my Master's [...] As far as keeping ties over here, it is more a kind of backup solution, to be honest. Never thought about citizenship when I came here but lately, I am thinking [...] why not have it! [...] if things do not go well for me in Pakistan, I will move somewhere else. [...] Actually, my supervisor offered me a job [...]. I turned him down. [...] I said that I would love to come back and work here but, for the moment, I am going back home.

Zafar, one of the older participants in the study, who had previously worked in Pakistan after completing his Bachelor's degree, decided to pursue a Master's degree abroad to find better job opportunities. At 31 years old, he moved to a bigger city in Finland to pursue his education. Unlike Rakesh and Afaf, Zafar did not have to move between cities to find a job to support his studies. He found a part-time cleaning job and was quickly promoted to a supervisory role by his boss, allowing him to cover his living expenses while pursuing his degree. After completing his Master's degree with good grades, he secured a paid PhD position which he is now closer to completing. While Zafar wants to return to Pakistan, he intends to do so only after securing the means to return to Finland. Zafar is unique in that he is an exception to the majority of Pakistani students who intend to onward migrate from Finland.

It is common for reality to deviate from the intentions, however. For example, unlike Karan and Arjun, who received IT developer jobs in Estonia, Afaf – who wanted to move to Canada in 2018 – was still residing in Finland as of 2022. After getting married in Pakistan, she applied for her husband to join her in Finland and they both moved to a bigger city in the north of the country where her husband found a professional job. This is not an uncommon occurrence and, during my time in Finland and Sweden, I have witnessed similar deviations from people's plans. For example, 25 Pakistani and Indian students came to pursue English-medium Master's programmes in eastern Finland in 2013. Only a few months after their arrival, three of them returned to their home countries. Among the remaining students, some managed to find temporary work distributing advertisements in the university town, while others sought opportunities for employment in larger towns during the summer months. Some students secured financial aid in the form of a stipend from the university, while the rest utilized the funds which they had brought with them to cover their expenses until the end of their taught courses.

Following their completion, some of the students were able to secure funding while working on their theses at the university. Others moved to Helsinki as they were no longer required to stay in the university town for their courses. After completing their Master's degrees, some of them secured paid PhD positions in countries like the Netherlands, France or Belgium as well as different cities in Finland. A few of them continued working in Helsinki; only one person secured a paid PhD position at the same university. As of 2022, one of the students who left Finland to pursue a paid PhD position has returned to work for an international company, while the rest have found professional jobs in the countries where they completed their PhDs. Those who continued working in Helsinki either found better jobs or moved on to other countries, such as the US, the UK and Switzerland, for even better career opportunities.

As for Sweden, 10 South Asian students were accepted onto the Electrical Engineering programme at a university in Blekinge County in 2009. After completing their first semester, most of the students moved to Gothenburg or Stockholm, as they were unable to secure work in their university town. They returned to the university town to continue their studies after working for up to three months. After completing their second semester, many of them once again moved to Stockholm or Gothenburg but, this time, several changed to online courses and only needed to return to the university town for laboratory work. As of 2022, three of the students were working as taxi drivers in Stockholm, a few others had started small businesses – including shops in Stockholm or other cities – and only one had returned to their home country.

The finding that many of the participants are still residing in Finland and Sweden matches with Mathies and Karhunen (2021) who found that 70% of international students are still living in Finland three years after their graduation. This study extends the focus to include another Nordic country to add to the return migration literature on ISM (King & Sondhi 2018; Liao & Asis 2020; Mathies & Karhunen 2021). At the final stage, in line with Marcu (2015), many of the respondents reported their intention to secure citizenship and permanent residence before returning or migrating onwards. However, the finding that some student migrants aspire to migrate onwards to another country for employment or to return to care for their parents in their towns of origin only after securing themselves against future uncertainties in the long run, adds to the student migration literature.

Overall, multiple stages of international student migration are interconnected. Student mobility to the next stage depends on their satisfaction and challenges faced in the initial place, the accumulation

of further mobility capital and the enticing opportunities in the next place. At the initial origin-to-destination stage, Indians and Pakistanis mentioned certain frustrating factors in the origin countries, combined with foreseeable career-development opportunities abroad. At the interregional level, unsatisfying job opportunities in the smaller university towns made students move. At the final stay-or-leave stage, the pursuit of even better careers or emotional reasons such as taking care of parents steered their choices. A discussion of these findings with the existing literature follows in the subsequent section.

Discussion and conclusion

Studying initial origin-to-destination and final stay-leave-or-onward migration that only examines international student migration overlooks the complexity of the process, as it ignores internal migration. The present study explored the intercity migration stage in addition to home-destination and stay-or-leave stages to show that international student migration can also be triple or multistage rather than single or double stage. While existing research on multistage migration often focuses on countries as stepping-stones in which migrants can gather human capital for moving on, this study suggests that replacing entry-point states with entry-point places adds a local layer to the analysis (Paul 2011; Walton-Roberts 2021). The present study's findings suggest that replacing the entry-point states with entry-point places adds a local layer of migration. Intercity migration findings on top of initial origin-to-destination and final stay-or-leave movements imply that ISM is translocal. Mobilising translocality theory (Brickell & Datta 2011; Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013) by adding places to countries allowed this study to bring the local back into the study of ISM as a multistage phenomenon. The framework of stepwise migration that Paul (2011) developed and Zijlstra (2020) employed to study student migration is adapted here to study the multiple stages of Pakistani and Indian student migration to, into and from the Nordic countries.

In a disaggregated stage-wise analysis, this study examined why Pakistani and Indian students choose Finland or Sweden, why they move between different cities within these countries and what influences their decision to stay or leave. By examining each stage separately, the study found that students are motivated to migrate due to better opportunities in their destination country and dissatisfaction with opportunities in their home country. Once they find satisfactory employment, they are less likely to move again. However, those who are dissatisfied with their current situation continue to search for better opportunities in subsequent stages of migration. There were some exceptions, however, such as those who were motivated by emotional reasons, including taking care of their parents.

For each of the above-mentioned approaches, a holistic assessment of student migration as a multistage process allows for a more nuanced consideration of the dynamics that affect decision-making at each juncture. Thus, the argument that Pakistani and Indian students participate in complex and often multistage intercity migration adds a new level of analysis by suggesting a novel stage of migration worthy of investigation and corresponds with other studies of students from different parts of the world who also experience migration as a multistage phenomenon (Mosneaga & Winther 2013). The stage of migrating between cities both before and after the degree completion gains further importance when international students seek further opportunities, such as those for further higher education (PhDs) or permanent employment (Carlson 2013; Geddie 2013). University cities are more than just transit hubs or migratory stopovers because they give student migrants a place to study, work and acquire social capital (Plöger & Becker 2015).

In conclusion, there is a need to expand the focus of ISM research beyond traditional home-to-host or stay-or-return factors and to include the third stage of intercity migration within the host country. Investigating the socio-spatial dimension of ISM, both before and after the completion of degrees in destination countries, allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This research used stepwise migration theory to analyse three stages of student migration in order to *understand the factors that prompt South Asian student migration to, within and – subsequently for some – from Finland and Sweden*. It found that the students' search for a better life involves multiple stages of migration that are interconnected to one another.

The first migration step from an origin to a destination country is often insufficient to satisfy the high-set ambitions of young Indian and Pakistani talents. The need to undertake a second and third migration stage implies that student migration is not a one-off step but an interconnected multistage endeavour with the first step of a processual movement laying the basis for additional migration steps to follow. Their social and cultural factors are the main driving force for their initial destination choice in their search for a better life. Their international experiences from the first migration step are useful in their second intercity migration and the third step – to stay or to leave. Studying the three stages together – or a multistage understanding – also enables a systematic comparison of student migrants' aspirations along the length of the entire migration trajectory. Future research with a longitudinal perspective which includes immigration policies and visa renewal challenges could address how student migrants' perspectives change over time based on experiences while abroad, acquired competencies and accumulated capital.

Acknowledgements

The Kone Foundation provided funding for this study as part of the programme Our Essential Neighbours. I sincerely appreciate the insightful criticism and comments from Marta Bivand Erdal, Aija Lulle, Paul Fryer, and Heikki Eskelinen. I want to thank everyone who participated for sharing their life experiences and enabling this research.

References

Ahrens, J., Kelly, M. & van Liempt, I. (2016) Free movement? The onward migration of EU citizens born in Somalia, Iran, and Nigeria. *Population, Space and Place* 22(1) 84–98. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1869

Anthias, F. (2012) Transnational mobilities, migration research and intersectionality. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 2(2) 102–110. https://doi.org/10.2478/v10202-011-0032-y

Baas, M. (2019) The education-migration industry: international students, migration policy and the question of skills. *International Migration* 57(3) 222–234. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12540

Beech, S. (2018) Adapting to change in the higher education system: international student mobility as a migration industry. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(4) 610–625. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1315515

Bilecen, B. & Van Mol, C. (2017) Introduction: international academic mobility and inequalities. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43(8) 1241–1255. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1300225

Brickell, K. & Datta, A. (eds.) (2011) *Translocal Geographies: Spaces, Places, Connections*. Routledge, London.

Brooks, R. & Waters, J. (2010) Social networks and educational mobility: the experiences of UK students. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 8(1) 143–157. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767720903574132

Cairns, D. & Smyth, J. (2011) I wouldn't mind moving actually: exploring student mobility in Northern Ireland. *International Migration* 49(2) 135–161. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2009.00533.x

Carling, J. & Schewel, K. (2018) Revisiting aspiration and ability in international migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(6) 945–963. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384146

Carlson, S. (2013) Becoming a mobile student: a processual perspective on German degree student mobility. *Population, Space and Place* 19(2) 168–180. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1749

Düvell, F. (2008) *Transit Migration in Europe.* Centre on Migration and Policy and Society (COMPAS), Oxford. https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018408096442

Denzin, N. & Lincon, Y. (2005) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 3rd ed. Sage, California.

Faist, T. (2013) The mobility turn: a new paradigm for the social sciences? *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36(11) 1637–1646. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.812229

Findlay, A. (2011) An assessment of supply and demand-side theorizations of international student mobility. *International Migration* 49(2) 162–190. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2010.00643.x

Geddie, K. (2013) The transnational ties that bind: relationship considerations for graduating international science and engineering research students. *Population, Space and Place* 19(2) 196–208. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1751

Greiner, C. & Sakdapolrak, P. (2013) Translocality: concepts, applications and emerging research perspectives. *Geography Compass* 7(5) 373–384. https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12048

Hazen, H. & Alberts, H. (2006) Visitors or immigrants? International students in the United States. *Population, Space and Place* 12(3) 201–216. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.409

King, K. & Newbold, K. (2007) Onward emigration to the United States by Canadian immigrants between 1995 and 2000. *International Migration Review* 41(4) 909–929. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2007.00105.x
King, R. & Sondhi, G. (2018) International student migration: a comparison of UK and Indian students' motivations for studying abroad. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 16(2) 176–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2017.1405244
Kou, A. & Bailey, A. (2014) 'Movement is a constant feature in my life': contextualising migration processes of highly skilled Indians. *Geoforum* 52 113–122. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.01.002
Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2015) *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. 3rd ed. Sage, Thousands Oaks.
Li, H. (2019) The role of the migration industry in Chinese student migration to Finland: towards a new meso-level approach. In Liu, H., Dervin, F. & Du, X. (eds.) *Nordic-Chinese Intersections Within Education*, 21–49. Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28588-3_2
Li, H. & Pitkänen, P. (2018) Understanding the integration of mainland Chinese students: the case of Finland. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 8(2) 107–115. https://doi.org/10.1515/njmr-2018-0008
Liao, K. & Asis, M. (2020) Back to the Philippines: connecting aspirations, return and social remittances in international student migration. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 29(3) 402–421. https://doi.org/10.1177/0117196820964999
Marcu, S. (2015) Uneven mobility experiences: life-strategy expectations among Eastern European undergraduate students in the UK and Spain. *Geoforum* 58 68–75. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.10.017
Mathies, C. & Karhunen, H. (2021) Do they stay or go? Analysis of international students in Finland. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 19(3) 298–310. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2020.1816926
Mosneaga, A. & Winther, L. (2013) Emerging talents? International students before and after their career start in Denmark. *Population, Space and Place* 19(2) 181–195. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1750
Mulder, C. H., Lundholm, E. & Malmberg, G. (2020) Young adults' migration to cities in Sweden: do siblings pave the way? *Demography* 57(6) 2221–2244. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-020-00934-z
Nachatar Singh, J. K., Schapper, J. & Jack, G. (2014) The importance of place for international students' choice of university: a case study at a Malaysian university. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 18(5) 463–474. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315314523990
Ndukwe, T. (2017) African immigrants in Finland in onward translocal and transnational mobility and migration, and the political implications. *Journal of Black Studies* 48(2) 115–142. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934716680323
OECD (2022) International student mobility (indicator). 01.02.2022 <*https://data.oecd.org/students/international-student-mobility.htm*>. 31.05.2022.
Ossman, S. (2013) Moving Matters: Paths of Serial Migration. Stanford University Press, Redwood City.
Paul, A. (2011) Stepwise international migration: a multistage migration pattern for the aspiring migrant. *American Journal of Sociology* 116(6) 1842–1886. https://doi.org/10.1086/659641
Perkins, R. & Neumayer, E. (2014) Geographies of educational mobilities: exploring the uneven flows of international students. *The Geographical Journal* 180(3) 246–259. https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12045
Plöger, J. & Becker, A. (2015) Social networks and local incorporation: grounding high-skilled migrants in two German cities. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41(10) 1517–1535. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1015407
Prazeres, L., Findlay, A., McCollum, D., Sander, N., Musil, E., Krisjane, Z. & Apsite-Berina, E. (2017) Distinctive and comparative places: alternative narratives of distinction within international student mobility. *Geoforum* 80 114–122. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.02.003
Raghuram, P. (2013) Theorising the spaces of student migration. *Population, Space and Place* 19(2) 138–154. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1747
Ramos, C. (2018) Onward migration from Spain to London in times of crisis: the importance of life-course junctures in secondary migrations. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(11) 1841–1857. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1368372
Riaño, Y. & Piguet, E. (2016) International student migration. *Oxford Bibliographies* 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199874002-0141
Sassen, S. (2001) *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo.* Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400847488
Schreier, M. (2012) *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*. Sage, Thousand Oaks.
Siu, L. (2007) *Memories of a Future Home: Diasporic Citizenship of Chinese in Panama*. Stanford University Press, Redwood City. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804767859
Sondhi, G. & King, R. (2017) Gendering international student migration: an Indian case-study. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43(8) 1308–1324. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1300288

Stouffer, S. A. (1940) Intervening opportunities: a theory relating mobility and distance. *American Sociological Review* 5(6) 845–867. https://doi.org/10.2307/2084520

Sun, Y. F., Pan, K. F. & He, Z. L. (2020) Intercity migration behavior of Chinese graduates: from home region to work destination. *The Annals of Regional Science* 64(1) 111–132. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00168-019-00958-3

Tu, M. & Nehring, D. (2020) Remain, return, or re-migrate? The (im)mobility trajectory of mainland Chinese students after completing their education in the UK. *International Migration* 58(3) 43–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12589

Van Mol, C. & Ekamper, P. (2016) Destination cities of European exchange students. *Geografisk Tidsskrift–Danish Journal of Geography* 116(1) 85–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/00167223.2015.1136229

Van Mol, C., Snel, E., Hemmerechts, K. & Timmerman, C. (2018). Migration aspirations and migration cultures: a case study of Ukrainian migration towards the European Union. *Population, Space and Place* 24(5) e2131. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2131

Walton-Roberts, M. (2021) Bus stops, triple wins and two steps: nurse migration in and out of Asia. *Global Networks* 21(1) 84–107. https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12296

Zijlstra, J. (2020) Stepwise student migration: a trajectory analysis of Iranians moving from Turkey to Europe and North America. *Geographical Research* 58(4) 403–415. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12434