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The Meaning of Education in Migrants' Experiences: The Case of High-Skilled Migrants from Azerbaijan in Poland

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Education is a meritocratic determinant which is perceived as a means to go ahead: the higher one's education is, the higher one's social status and income is (or should be). The literature in the field is limited in viewing education abroad as a way of accumulating human capital and valorising on the host labour market to gain an international career. However, education (abroad) can also entail life experiences and travel and a 'second chance' at success, where a decision about education abroad is not solely made for the sake of education but is also influenced by other social and political factors. This article sheds light on the different meanings and use of education (abroad) by high-skilled Azerbaijanis who migrate to Poland. Preliminary findings from biographical narrative interviews demonstrate that the meanings of education are more complex, with no single narrative. Pre-migration education is highly emphasised by both the internal and the external environment. Yet, within the migratory trajectory, education is utilised for different purposes, including as a motive for an 'escape from' troubles and conflicts in Azerbaijan. This takes place against the backdrop of the specifics of the Polish labour market accompanied by economic growth and facilitating policies, as well as the efforts of migrants to maintain their social class, while trying to outsmart institutional mechanisms in Poland.

Keywords: education abroad; escape from motive; biographical narrative interviews; migration from Azerbaijan to Poland

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Introduction

There is a lot of emphasis on education as one of the primary means of access to the labour market and eventually a road to success and higher social status. As such, getting an education is one of the ways of accumulating capital to raise the bar of one's employability and, hopefully, a successful career (Themelis 2017). An education abroad is strongly encouraged in this regard, especially with an emphasis on gaining internationally recognised qualifications, which will be expected to lead to international careers for many migrants on the host labour market. In fact, several studies have focused on the ways applied by migrants to accumulate cultural capital in the host country (Erel 2010; Erel and Ryan 2019). Nevertheless, migration for an education abroad is not a decision made solely to gain qualifications because it is also influenced by other social, political and cultural factors which can also entail travel and life experiences, as well as a 'second chance' at success (Brooks and Waters 2009). Additionally, it is not a choice that is made simply by the agents of migration for the sake of education and thus knowledge itself (Findlay 2011).

This paper explores the meaning behind education (abroad) as the driving factor for migration from a biographical perspective. It attemps to explain how meanings of education (abroad) shift in pre- and post-migration biographies and why. Although there is evidence of different views and uses of education (abroad), discussions heavily reflect the actual use of education for different purposes, leaving it at the instrumental level. Such a focus, however, neglects other potential views on education as well as the shifts in its meaning in biographies when it concerns migration. Thus, the multiple meanings of education are discussed in this paper, drawing on the cases of high-skilled migrants in Poland who come from middle-class families in Azerbaijan. I refer to the high-skilled as those having completed a tertiary education, including professionals such as tech professionals, managers, accountants, engineers, social workers and teachers, based on the OECD and World Bank definitions (Docquier and Marfouk 2006). The interviewees come from middle-class families and much of the literature discusses their migration as a means to preserve their status against the odds of the political and economic challenges faced in the home country (Limpangong 2013; Mapril 2014; Torresan 2012). This is a particularly widely studied case for migration of the highly qualified, who also – as the evidence shows – opt for accumulating more capital, including an education in the host country, in order to prevent deskilling and to cope with the different challenges posed by career advancement (Al Ariss 2010; Zikic, Bonache and Cerdin 2010).

The case of Azerbaijanis within this context is also interesting to explore. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union (SU), with its economic and political challenges, education abroad was somewhat of a luxury, available only for the elite with their political capital and ties to the former SU, including the Russian Federation and some Western (European) countries to a limited degree (Rumyantsev 2013). However, the establishment of *Turkish lyceums* in the 1990s made education abroad more accessible, although primarily for middle class families, who viewed this as the road to education abroad, including in Turkey. Some of my interviewees, in fact, are graduates of these lyceums. Later, with the launch of government scholarships, education abroad became accessible on a meritocratic basis in Azerbaijan. The first round of scholarships was launched between 2007 and 2015, followed by the second launch which started in 2019 and has continued throughout 2023 (Musayev 2021).

That said, despite the high emphasis on education abroad – both as part of a political agenda and encouraged by the internal environment (family etc.) – as the means to gain knowledge and accumulate capital, I argue that for high-skilled Azerbaijani migrants in Poland, education (abroad) carries multiple meanings. It becomes, in fact, a secondary motive for the purpose of migration, which becomes a solution to 'escape from' troubles they have experienced in Azerbaijan and a way to maintain their middle-class background. Furthermore,

facilitating policies allowing access to the labour market for the full-time students in Poland provide a fruitful ground for Azerbaijanis to manœuvre and utilise education (abroad) for such purposes.

In what follows, I first discuss the different motives behind education (abroad). I then examine migration flows from Azerbaijan to Poland for the purpose of education and the literature on the economic growth of Poland. Lastly, I provide evidence of my findings from biographical narrative interviews conducted with high-skilled Azerbaijani migrants with a middle-class background in Poland. I also discuss these findings in accordance with the specificities of certain policies that provide easy access to the Polish labour market for migrants at a time of economic growth, as well as the fact that an education in Poland is more accessible for Azerbaijanis through the help of intermediaries in Azerbaijan.

Different motives behind education (abroad)

Education has long been discussed as one of the merits defining the future of an individual with the expectation of return in rewards; as such, it was associated with the idea of 'learning leading to earning' (Becker 1993). On the one hand, various studies documented individuals' perceptions about education as meritocratic and a means to advance professionally (Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; Kunovich and Slomczynski 2007); on the other, education is also viewed as contributing to inequalities, leaving behind those who cannot keep up with the competition for places at higher-education institutions (Goldthorpe 2003; Sandel 2020). There is no doubt that education, as referred by Bourdieu (1986), is a cultural capital which is best leveraged and converted to acquire economic capital – particularly in its institutionalised form, it is supposed to guarantee the outcome. The strategies applied by migrants to accumulate and utilise their capital are highly significant, 'as temporal and geographic trajectories and dimensions of constituting and mobilising capital are key to understanding how migrants make use of them' (Erel 2010: 647).

Education abroad as cultural capital is studied both in terms of institutionalised capital and knowledge as such and of social capital for the connections and networks gained as a result of studying (Dustmann and Glitz 2011; Waters and Brooks 2011). It is also viewed as the pathway to the host-country labour market and, subsequently, an international career and higher social mobility and status (Robertson, Hoare and Harwood 2011). The two views on education abroad are not mutually exclusive. Studies on the perceptions of education abroad by different migrants, including those from the UK, India and Georgia, reveal that the majority are keen to access it because they believe in its rewards – such as international careers, a better life and higher qualifications (Findlay, Prazere, McCollum and Packwood 2017; Gorgoshidze 2010; King and Sondhi 2018). Moreover, the decisions are not only made by the agents themselves but also by the influence of their families. In this regard, the expectations of family members are a guarantee of the journey for education abroad being made by their children, be it through qualifications gained or careers undertaken. In some cases, parents play a significant role in directing their children towards certain educational paths by choosing relevant schools (Keskiner 2015).

Yet, the background and class ascription of individuals in search of an education abroad reflect different motives and unequal experiences, which are also dependent on the background of the specifics of the country of origin. These characteristics lead individuals to opt for an education abroad as a life strategy (Marcu 2015). For those coming from a less-advantageous economic background, an education abroad is viewed as a solution to the instability whereby they are expected to remain in host countries. Those originating from the middle classes tend to perceive migration for education abroad as a life experience and an excuse for travel; this is also the case for those who have some family members overseas, who encourage and push for such mobility, particularly those from leading Western countries (Brooks and Waters 2009; Findlay *et al*. 2017). Education abroad is also viewed as the 'second chance' in success. This particular category mainly concerns the

individuals who, after having failed succeeding in admission to prestigious local high education institutions, decide to try their chances abroad (Brooks and Waters 2009). Additionally, an education abroad is also a means for employers to compete for global talent, whose agents are viewed as potential labour migrants (Li and Lowe 2016). Labour-market policies in Poland, with the country's recent economic growth and the availability of foreign employers, both provide a beneficial environment for such purposes.

While there is an extensive emphasis on the different motives behind an education abroad based on the evidence and its actual utilisation in the host country for different purposes, the question arises as to whether an education abroad can, in fact, serve merely as a means to get away from home rather than acquiring knowledge? What if its use can only be reflected in the documentation process and, in fact, may lose its significance for learning once there is migration involved? What if this becomes a strategy for migrants to have legal access to the Polish labour market and nothing more? To be able to reflect on these questions, there is a need for some insight into the context of both the Polish labour market and migration flows from Azerbaijan to Poland, as discussed below.

Polish economic growth and labour-market specificity

In countries with relatively high emigration rates and, consequently, labour-market demands for a foreign workforce, policies allowing easier access to the labour market become useful. This concerns not only post-education employment but also – and more importantly – employment during the period of study. In this regard, Poland is an interesting case, as individuals enrolled in Polish higher-education institutions on a full-time basis are automatically granted access to employment on the Polish labour market. Moreover, work permits are not mandatory for them. Such facilitating political instruments might be for several reasons, such as Poland's recent economic growth and the labour market demands for an additional workforce in the face of demographic changes in the country.

Poland has seen steady economic growth in the last 10 years, becoming one of the fastest-growing EU member states. This was due to a stable annual growth in GDP of 3.6 per cent between 2004 and 2016, unlike overall EU growth, which was 1.5 per cent – achieved through expanding domestic consumption and foreign investments (Kaczmarczyk 2018). Consequently, in 2017, *circa* 122,000 workplaces could not be filled, in particular in agriculture, machinery and trade (Babakova 2018). In addition, the fruitful environment for business, lower labour costs and taxes, as well as a relatively good life attracted a number of transnational companies to Poland, which raised the bar for demands for a foreign workforce primarily in skilled work and provided the grounds for facilitating policies incentivising migration to the country and access to its labour market. Thus, it is not surprising that there have been several amendments to the existing laws that aimed to relatively stabilise employment and which were initially considered on a temporary basis. The changes were reflected in a stricter control of the conditions of civil-law contracts which are mostly characterised by unstable and insecure jobs as well as in the extension of the period of employment without a work permit from 6 months to up to 2 years within the framework of the so-called policy tool of *declaration to entrust a job to a foreigner* (Gajdos, Arendt, Balcerzak and Pietrzak 2020). It is worth noting that the employment opportunities in Poland through the above-mentioned declaration are addressed to the citizens of 5 countries – Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

In fact, many employers tend to benefit from such facilitating policies due to the economies to be made in both time and finances for the recruitment procedure, with no obligation for applicants to apply for work permits and the lower salaries offered both during and after their graduate studies. Such a vision might be tempting for both migrants coming to Poland for education purposes and for employers. As a result, an education abroad can become instrumentally used by individuals as a means to *migrate* to Poland or to easily

deal with documentation in the recruitment process. In support of this, it is worth mentioning that the decision about migration for education is not solely made for the purpose of education and the commodification of any acquired knowledge in the future. It can, in fact, be made within different social, political and cultural contexts where personal factors and perceptions might also play a role (Findlay 2011; Li and Bray 2007; Li and Lowe 2016). In fact, labour-market policies in Poland provide fruitful grounds for migrants opting for earning rather than learning, even those who initially migrate for educational reasons, with current institutional mechanisms easy to manœuvre.

Recent migration flows from Azerbaijan to Poland

Immigration from Azerbaijan to Poland is a more recent trend compared to that of its neighbouring countries in the South Caucasus. Compared to migrants from Georgia and Armenia, the number of migrants from Azerbaijan in Poland is relatively lower, although increasing flows are observed. Starting from 2016, Poland was one of the first 5 EU countries to host the majority of Azerbaijanis with valid permits, together with France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Czechia. Poland soon became the EU country hosting the second-greatest number of Azerbaijanis with valid permits in 2017 (2,105), 2018 (3,080) and 2019 (1,958) outnumbered only by France, having granted the valid permits of 3,454 for 2017, 3,560 for 2018 and 3,671 for 2019 (Eurostat 2021).

Poland and Azerbaijan have visa regulations and the primary channels through which Azerbaijani nationals arrive in Poland are education and, recently and more often, employment for both low- and high- qualified individuals. Concerning the former, students from Azerbaijan were in the top 5 numbers of foreign students from Asia in Poland for 2019 (Statistics Poland 2020b). Moreover, between 2018 and 2021, the number of students from Azerbaijan in Poland increased threefold. While, in 2020, there were only 479 students, in 2021 this number rose to 1,416 students (Statistics Poland, n.d.). There are at least 2 reasons for such an increase: firstly, education in Poland is more accessible to students from Azerbaijan – it also promises a period spent in the EU and a diploma from an EU-based educational institution for relatively cheap tuition fees compared to other EU states; and, secondly, being enrolled in a Polish higher-education institution allows migrants direct access to the labour market both during and after their studies – seen as a great opportunity to gain work experience in the EU. The latter is the reason why many migrants from Azerbaijan, after arriving in Poland, are in fact prone to resigning from the university after being granted an employment contract. On the other hand, employers recruit students more easily when the latter are automatically granted access to the labour market, requiring less time spent on recruitment while benefitting from paying relatively lower salaries to students. Additionally, there are a number of intermediaries, such as private companies in Azerbaijan which organise education abroad and which provide help and advice in application process for interested students through their partner universities. Some of the interviewees were also familiar with these agencies and a few had even had consultations with them. Moreover, connections in Poland also play a great role in attracting the interest of Azerbaijanis to apply for an education in Poland.

That said, education seems to be one of the easiest ways of dealing with the documentation procedure for Azerbaijani nationals, given the visa regulations between the countries, which might explain why there are comparatively fewer students from neighbouring Georgia than from Azerbaijan in Poland – for 2019 and 2020, there were nearly 3 times fewer Georgian students in Poland compared to Azerbaijanis, with only 270 and 469 students respectively (Statistics Poland 2019, 2020a). This might be due to other options open to Georgians who migrate to Poland, such as the short-term non-visa regulations between Poland and Georgia and other facilitating policies – such as the *declaration to entrust a job to a foreigner*, as mentioned earlier – that allow for the official employment of Georgians without a work permit,.

The data already demonstrate some tendencies of Azerbaijanis to migrate to Poland which might be more peculiar compared to other nationals. At first sight, education might be the reason for migration; however, it is, indeed, more complex according to the literature on the different motives behind education abroad. Although it might be expected that high-skilled migrants might highly value an education abroad as one of the merits in later seeking employment there – and, in fact, they do try to accumulate more capital in this regard – this paper questions these intentions by exploring how an education abroad is reflected in the biographies of highly qualified middle-class migrants, the multiple meanings for it and why.

Data method and sampling

The data for this article come from 11 biographical narrative interviews (Schütze 1983) conducted with migrants from Azerbaijan in Poland from October 2021 to April 2022. Biographical interviews are composed of life stories that are narrated where the different phases of life carry certain meanings for the interviewees which are examined through their connection to their overall biographies. Studying certain phenomena such as education within the context of a person's biography reveals the meanings that individuals attach to them, including how they explain their choices and interpret their experiences, both from an internal perspective and also through the various conditions that shaped those experiences (Rosenthal 2004). Education is central in a person's life, where it has certain meanings and emphasis in a biography and how the individual evaluates it. I used the narrative interviews for them to tell me their life stories, starting either from their childhood or from their migration to Poland. In the latter case, I later asked them to narrate more about their earlier years spent in Azerbaijan. In both cases, the interviewees provided detailed information about their educational paths, both pre- and post-migration, as well as about the role of education as they saw it and the meanings which they and their family members put on it both in Azerbaijan and abroad. Because biographies were central to the interviews, I explored the meanings of education in the biographies of high-skilled migrants from Azerbaijan, which made it possible for me to study the emphasis put on education and the expectations from it, from childhood to the present time. I explored the narratives about the role of *formal* education in their biographies.

Biographical narrative interviews were conducted with 7 men and 4 women living and working in Poland at the time of the interview, where the average duration of their residence in the country was about 5 years, with the minimum 2 years and the maximum 8 years. The shortest interview lasted for 2 hours and 5 minutes, while the longest took 3 hours and 23 minutes. Ten interviews were recorded in Azerbaijani and 1 in Russian, with the signed consent of the interviewees before the interviews took place. The interviews were transcribed in their respective languages accordingly and anonymised, including the interviewees' names.

The youngest interviewee was 25 years old and the oldest 41. While 5 of them had a Master's degree, 4 had a Bachelor's degree and 2 were finalising their Master's degree at the time of the interview. 5 of them received their master's degree in Poland. At the time of the interview, 9 of them were employed in education, finance, information and technology, while 2 were unemployed – with one searching for a job and another about to start work in a tech company. They were the residents of big cities, such as Warsaw, Krakow and Wroclaw. The interviewees were mainly recruited through acquaintances living in Poland. Thus far, the experience with recruitment reveals that migrants from Azerbaijan showed more trust and were more open when information about recruitment to my study was shared through their acquaintances and friends. The interviews analysed in this article, in fact, constitute a portion of the sample of my overall PhD project where I look at different mechanisms, including the (non-)meritocratic determinants, shaping Azerbaijani and Georgian migrants' careers on the labour market in Poland. The overall criteria of sample selection were age, gender, employment in both low- and high-skill occupations and education level. For this article, I analysed the pilot interviews in

which I noticed multiple meanings around the role of education – as a merit – explicitly shared in their narratives.

I analysed the data by applying a grounded theory method; I first coded certain segments of the texts, grouping them into categories, identifying their relationships and comparing them with each other (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Findings

Education (abroad) as a collective decision in pre-migration biographies

The interviewees were born and raised in middle-class families by parents who were highly skilled professionals such as teachers, doctors, engineers and economists. Since their childhood, they have received a lot of advice concerning the importance of education as a way to continue the family legacy and succeed in life. Their families held expectations about them pursuing a higher-education path and subsequently leading a successful life. Thus, the influence of the family on them receiving a formal education was central to their overall narratives about their educational paths. The main reason for this was that education was expected to bring rewards and to overcome poverty, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet education was also described as the 'known road' for the interviewees – one that they followed without questioning.

Almost all of Sattar's family members were involved in science and he gives it as the reason for his own interest in science and for him ending up taking a similar educational path. He completed his Bachelor's degree in Azerbaijan influenced by his family's choice to pursue an education in environmental sciences. At the time of the interview, he was finalising his first Master's degree in Poland and starting on his second one. He admitted: 'All my family is about scientists. There would always be a saying in my family that science is first, whatever you do, you have to study, get education…'.

This was also due to the narrative of an *intellectual* family during the Soviet Union. The parents, having been educated in the Soviet Union, were aware of the importance of education and encouraged their children to study well at all costs. Interestingly, the narratives did not focus only around the expectations of the children of *intellectual* families by their parents but also by society. In this regard, Taleh's interpretation of his biography as an *intellectual* child is intriguing.

> *Now they say intellectual children, like they are saying something like 'Look at the father, look at the son', there are such things… It was like this, this is both the effect and the result of that intellectual family, I think that I have been following that road, I am following it even now, it is normal… I was someone who grew up in such an environment. I would not even attempt to do something unusual; I would not even think of it… And this is what success is for most people, to have a good education, choose the right profession according to society, for ex: a lawyer, a great profession, it can work in any country. I wanted to say that I am exactly like, 'Okay, you must get education, must study, must choose a good profession'.*

Here Taleh refers to his *intellectual* family and relates it to his parents holding higher-education degrees in the Soviet Union, where they both worked as engineers and thus encouraged their children to pursue an education by creating such an environment. He thus implicitly differentiates them from those performing simple physical work, who were mostly uneducated during the Soviet regime. In fact, education was highly valued during the Soviet Union and the statement below, by Khrushchev (as cited in Zajda 1980: 5), gives an idea of the narrative

about the value of education in families where its failure is associated with the type of employment one will have to perform:

> *If a boy or girl does not study well, the parents and the people around them frighten the child by saying that, if he does not study well, failing to get a gold or silver medal (for academic excellence), he will not be able to get into university and will have to work in a factory as a common labourer.*

It seems that the meaning given to formal education under the Soviet Union was quite high, despite the fact that the Soviet education system was, in fact, corrupt, taking the form of nepotism and briberies and where the family background and social connections – including their affiliation to the communist party – was seen as significant (Osipian 2009; Titma, Tuma and Roosma 2003). However, individuals' perceptions might not be compatible with the reality concerning their education during the Soviet Union. Azerbaijani engineers who received their education during the Soviet regime did not seem to perceive such cases as important (Ergun and Sayfutdinova 2021). Thus, it may come as no surprise that the value of education during the Soviet regime was significantly widespread among families as the road to success and social mobility. Later, with the collapse of the Soviet Union having led to the economic crisis and downward mobility of a number of individuals, education was viewed as a solution. In line with this, Araz narrates how his family, including his father, insisted on and controlled him being a straight 'A' student from his earlier days at school. His family would check his grades and punish him when he failed to get an 'A'. Araz justifies his family's views and actions in the following way:

> *They were afraid, they were afraid – my father, my aunt – my grandma was afraid that if you do not get admitted to the university, that's it, you will live in poverty and be wasted… As if you needed to study to be able to get admitted to university to reach the peaks in your life, to be intelligent and to have a good salary. This is the kind of fear people from the Soviet Union had… They were especially afraid because everything collapsed in the 1990s and everyone lived in poverty and people's status decreased; my father was at the Academy of Sciences and others were professors, or engineers at the plants and everything collapsed and people were selling tomatoes in bazaars*.

Such a strong emphasis on formal education after the collapse of the Soviet regime might also be due to its transformation to a market economy. In fact, the Soviet regime was also characterised by the government benefits assigned to individuals for different purposes (Flanagan, Campbell, Botcheva, Bowes, Csapo, Macek and Sheblanova 2003). After the collapse of the regime, individuals started to rely on themselves once the realities associated with the market economy – and, thus, the role of qualities such as education – became central in the family narratives. Education was highly valued by the internal environment – such as the interviewee's family members who witnessed the Soviet and post-Soviet period – whereas education abroad was encouraged by the external environment such as educational institutions and in competition with peers.

Education abroad was also highly valued in Azerbaijan during the Soviet regime; a number of individuals received their education outside the country, mostly in Moscow and St Petersburg, given the colonial ties and the accessibility. A post-Soviet education abroad was initially more accessible to the children of political elites, which meant not only better employment but, more importantly, contributing to the *modernisation* of Azerbaijan (Rumyantsev 2013). In later periods, the establishment of *Turkish lyceums* created a pathway to higher education in Turkey, which was almost a guarantee since the curriculum was based on the programme applied in Turkey. With a limited number of scholarships available, studying at such lyceums was primarily on a paid basis, which made it largely accessible to the middle classes. In fact, between 2000 and 2022, Turkey

hosted the greatest number of Azerbaijanis studying on government scholarships, even more than the Russian Federation or other CIS countries (State Statistics Committee of Azerbaijan, n.d.).

Recently, however, education abroad has also been promoted in Azerbaijan as a political agenda. In fact, the government programme of 2007–2015, during which time 3,558 scholarships were awarded, was the first of its kind to allow an education abroad for citizens of Azerbaijan on a scholarship basis (Musayev 2021). In 2019, the second edition of the scholarship programme was launched and is expected to finalise in 2023. Moreover, the existence of different external scholarship programmes, including those of the UK, the US and the Visegrád countries, for the citizens of Azerbaijan made education abroad more accessible on a meritocratic basis. Thus, it was not surprising to see a strong emphasis on the importance of education abroad in the narratives of the interviewees. Education abroad was incentivised collectively in different ways: as a form of competition with one's peers – demonstrating one's abilities – and by the institutional environment. When Emma saw that her fellow students – whom she identified as 'rich and those who failed four times at exams which I passed' – were going to study abroad, she took it as a challenge and decided that 'If they go, I will also go. They go with money; I will go with a scholarship'. Her inner motive for studying abroad is also rooted in the meritocratic image of her success although, in fact, she faced some objections from her family, who did not at first support her idea of moving to another country.

Furthermore, an education abroad was related to 'finalising' one's qualifications – in particular in terms of receiving a Master's degree – which also took place in the context of disappointment with the education received in Azerbaijan and with the intention of getting a 'real education' and better employment. In both cases, an education abroad was encouraged by the internal and the external environment. Thus Ayla reflects on how she internalised the importance of an education abroad after having received a BA during her studies:

> *...when we were studying, that thing was kind of instilled in our minds that to study abroad is better, as if studying abroad is one way to get ahead. Today you studied; the next step is for you to study abroad, so that you could move forward and grow, going ahead. I was feeling deficiency because we were told at university that a BA is an undergraduate qualification, and that a graduate one is at least a Master's degree. But I felt that gap, that, no…*

Education abroad, in particular with the intention of gaining a Master's degree, seems to be strongly correlated with the idea of making progress. The perception that an education abroad leads to growth and getting ahead was also documented in other studies (Findlay *et al.* 2017; Gorgoshidze 2010; King and Sondhi 2018); however, in the case of Azerbaijanis, it mostly occurs through frustration with undergraduate studies followed in the country. Individuals felt the need to 'satisfy their thirst' by migrating for educational purposes, as Sattar describes in his narrative: 'All my life I was dreaming of science, but what science in Azerbaijan?! Ahhh yeah, I decided that I will apply for the university [in Poland]'. He later describes how he was 'craving' for science once he migrated to Poland and therefore decided to study for his second Master's degree there. Brooks and Waters (2009) describe the meaning of an education abroad for British students as a 'second chance' at success following their failure to get into the most highly rated UK universities – especially when they find equally good options elsewhere, such as in the US or Australia. The case of Azerbaijanis can also be labelled as a 'second chance' with the exception of the interviewees' frustration with education in Azerbaijan, especially in the post-Soviet era, which is characterised by poor quality, corruption and a lack of adequate resources. Thus, with the Azerbaijani education system having failed them, they begin to search for other alternatives for a successful education. Moreover, the frustration with education in Azerbaijan also concerns the discrepancies between the study programmes and the demands of the labour market, which also results in the unemployment of many young graduates (Amirova and Valiyev 2021).

Similarly, Bilal describes how his 'dreams fell into the water' following his BA studies in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. Later, he decided to migrate to Poland for further education after an exchange of information with his former fellow students who were both studying and working there at the time. Employment opportunities both during and after one's education became an incentive for Bilal to migrate to Poland. This also happened, as he recalls, once he failed to get a higher IELTS score enabling him to study in 'better' universities in the UK or Germany and, in particularly, after having failed to receive a student visa for his studies in Italy. As such, almost all the interviewees ended up in Poland – even though it was not their priority country. Poland thus became a 'second chance' at success for them, having failed with other universities/countries; the context of lower tuition fees relative to other EU states was also to their selection of Poland.

Education abroad as an 'escape from' motive

The narratives of my interviewees demonstrate that there are numerous perspectives on the decision made for the purpose of education abroad. This becomes more explicit when an education abroad or, more explicitly, enrolment at an educational institution, becomes a secondary motive for migration. Sattar migrated to Poland with his wife on a visa in order to attend a language course and ended up working in precarious jobs since his visa did not grant him access to the labour market. Similarly, Mahir used education as a means to migrate to Poland for employment purposes. He was admitted to one of the smaller universities in the south of Poland and, once arrived, started working as a taxi driver. Interestingly, in the interviewees' biographies, education carries significant meaning. Some of them changed secondary schools at the initiative of their families – aiming at getting a better education – and continued their studies at Turkish lyceums.

By further exploring their biographies, it becomes evident that, in fact, an education abroad for my interviewees is not only a means to migrate but, consequently, also an 'escape from' motive rooted in their biographical trajectories of some kind of suffering in Azerbaijan and a solution to their desire to escape (Kazmierska, Piotrowski and Waniek 2011; Waniek 2019). An 'escape from' motive can refer to the somewhat dire conditions seen in a person's biography – with such push factors as being in serious trouble and suffering from distress and affliction; it can also refer to other conditions, including economic challenges and other biographical conditions, as documented by Kazmierska *et al*. (2011: 149). Although my informants did not seem to have suffered too deeply, the experiences they had before migration to Poland shaped their idea of Azerbaijan being a solution to their situation, given that they had conflicts with different institutions – authoritative and educational institutions, as well as previous employers – and disagreements with their families. Kamila saw migration as a solution to her mental stress back in Azerbaijan following a conflictual situation with her employer and a friend, whereas Bilal was determined to leave the country after being in trouble with the local authorities: 'I told myself that, even they pay me one million USD to stay or tell me to come, I do not need that and that was it. I applied to Italy, it did not work out so I came to Poland'.

Araz had numerous conflicts with his previous employers back in Azerbaijan regarding payments and unfair treatment, whereas Taleh saw no further perspectives with his qualifications and therefore migration to Poland was a solution, especially with the labour demand there in the field of IT. The 'escape from' motive in this context is also supported by the intention of the highly skilled to preserve their social status through migration, especially after various challenges in home country. Several studies discussed the migration of the highly qualified individuals as a way for them to maintain their middle-class status instead of fighting against the politically and economically driven issues that might have threatened their status in the home country (Limpangong 2013; Mapril 2014; Torresan 2012). Moreover, as Azevedo, Atamanov and Rajabov (2014: 11) point out, 'the growing middle class… is the most unstable group and the people who comprise it have non-

negligible chances of moving to the vulnerable or poor groups'. While opting for migration, with an education mostly incentivised as a secondary motive, Azerbaijanis were also, in fact, making efforts to maintain their social status by 'escaping from' the situations that made them vulnerable; and they saw no other way than migration, which came at a relatively lower cost and with a beneficial labour-market environment in Poland.

Education abroad as a way of outsmarting institutional mechanisms

Although some of my informants arrived in Poland for educational purposes and were enrolled at universities, they ended up working without completing their education. This was possible because a full-time student status automatically grants access to the labour market in Poland and a person does not need to obtain a work permit. Demand for an additional workforce, easier recruitment procedures as well as personal connections were of great importance in their employment while being a student. Employers, in fact, are more interested in hiring students due to lower wages to be paid, easier access through universities as well as less time spent on the overall recruitment process (Evans, Pucik and Barsoux 2002; Peltokorpi and Froese 2009). Due to an easily accessible Polish labour market that does not necessarily demand that the applicants have locally acquired qualifications, learning was not a priority for some of the interviewees. Furthermore, having a student status becomes some kind of 'migration tactic', as formulated by one of the interviewees – Bilal – whereby it is possible to outsmart institutional mechanisms related to education and recruitment.

> *I am still thinking huh, I would give 2,500PLN to X* [names the university], *for one semester, I will be a student of that university and I will change company, these are the tactics of migration, I am sharing with you… I get a student status, I change company, I give the document for HR to take all the needed information and details and then, if I leave university, then I leave, so what?!*

Even though Bilal seemed satisfied with his studies in Poland and just had to work on his dissertation to complete his education, he withheld paying his tuition fees and 'froze' his education. During the second year of his studies, he started to work in finance and later also launched his own business in Poland. At the time of the interview, his business needed some financial commitment and he preferred to invest in his business, rather than pay the tuition fees to continue his studies. Moreover, in her narrative, Kamila spoke of how she used her enrolment at a higher-education institution in Poland for visa purposes, which would allow her to migrate to Poland with her husband and later decided to withdraw due to challenges with commuting.

> *The easiest way to come here / coming as a married couple, the processes are more difficult. The easiest way is to apply for a visa as a student and get accepted. Actually, I just came here, I didn't study at the university, because our university was in the city of X* [names the city]. *And my husband got a job in X* [names the city], *they are about 5 hours apart, so it was impossible to go back and forth, so I had to leave the university.*

It is evident that, from the beginning, Kamila's intention was not to get education but, rather, to settle legally in Poland through a visa based on her enrolment at the university, which ensures and facilitates her arrival in Poland. Thus, she also outsmarts the justification of her visa to arrive in Poland with her husband.

Outsmarting certain systems becomes a solution and a strategy to leverage the available options to one's benefit, as was the case of the uber drivers in Poland (Polkowska and Mika 2022). In so doing, the uber drivers went beyond what was permissible based on the regulations and navigated the systems to get as much earnings as possible. Although the interviewees did not, in any way, violate the rules, they manœuvred the existing

institutional mechanisms in light of gaps available to benefit from the labour market in Poland. The typical scenario of outsmarting an institutional mechanism in Poland is as follows: enrolment at a university > applying for a job > recruitment > leaving the university. When changing employers, migrants would sometimes again opt to enroll at a university in order to gain a student status, as Kamila did when she received another job offer.

As such, it seems that, within the context of the Polish labour market, earning becomes more of a priority than learning. This is particularly crucial when referring to the earlier evidence on the middle classes' efforts to maintain their social status to which migration is also a central factor. Nevertheless, earning is also a priority due to the financial challenges faced in the post-migration period. Although Emma's education in Poland was related to cultural studies, she ended up working in finance because there was a demand in that field for workers and she knew she would have good benefits. Emma, in fact, received a scholarship in cultural studies to enable her to migrate to Poland, whereas education was not a priority for her, as she repeatedly touched on in her narrative:

> *I did not take my Master's degree seriously, just treated it as something in order to stay here, to have a visa and be able to work, not to study, no, not study; and the field was an unrelated field and I am saying again, in fact this was the only field that suited me to come here and I applied – and I came*.

Although Emma completed her degree in Poland, she did not study for the purpose of acquiring knowledge. Despite the fact that she had a good job back in Azerbaijan where she was also offered a promotion, she preferred to migrate because she felt exhausted both physically and mentally. She saw education abroad as the 'escape from' her burdens, hoping in the meantime to preserve her status and continue to succeed, as she had back in her home country.

Conclusion

Mobility for educational purposes is separate from other types of mobility in many studies, mainly because the research limits itself to exploring education abroad, primarily from the 2 perspectives of accumulating human capital and acquiring an international career, as demonstrated in several studies (Findlay *et al.* 2017; Gorgoshidze 2010; King and Sondhi 2018). However, the motives behind education abroad also depend on the migrant's social class; in fact, for those coming from a less-economically advantageous background, education abroad is a kind of life strategy and a solution to their economic instability in the country of origin while, for the middle classes, it is also the reason for or a kind of strategy of at least preserving their social status by migrating (Brooks and Waters 2009; Findlay *et al*. 2017; Marcu 2015; Waters 2005).

This study has tried to demonstrate that the motives behind an education (abroad) are, in fact, more complex and there is no single narrative based on the evidence of the biographical narrative interviews conducted with high-skilled migrants from Azerbaijan in Poland. When comparing pre- and post-migration periods, the biographical exposure allowed me to explore more in-depth meanings to education (abroad), shaped since the early years of the interviewee's lives, as well as how and why the meaning of education and its actual utilisation changes. As such, formal education seems to have an important meaning in the earlier stages of their lives, heavily influenced by the family and the social environment, given that they come from a middle-class background where their parents also held highly qualified positions. Such an importance accorded to education is rooted in the expectation of education in return for rewards and as a solution to economic challenges, particularly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This, in addition to the realities of the capitalist regime – unlike communism, where an individual learns to rely on him- or herself and having fewer expectations from

the government. This was also accompanied by the political and economic instability whereby education was viewed as the solution to eventually having some sort of economic resilience against the environment.

Additionally, education abroad serves as 'a second chance' at success against the backdrop of frustration and dissatisfaction with the education system in Azerbaijan. It becomes highly available due to intermediaries in Azerbaijan – primarily private companies that facilitate the admission process to higher-education institutions in Poland and lower tuition fees compared to other EU countries; having connections in Poland facilitates its selection as a host country for those with a middle-class background who wish to migrate for educational purposes.

After further exploring the biographies of the interviewees, it becomes evident that education abroad serves as an 'escape from' motive – as a strategy to migrate from Azerbaijan and the conflicts and troublesome situations they have experienced with employers, families and local authorities. In fact, the 'escape from' motive is central to their overall decision to migrate – in which they use the most accessible means to do so – an education abroad. Indeed, it becomes a secondary motive for migration purposes, where it is also utilised instrumentally as an easier way to arrive in Poland, as well as to access the labour market while outsmarting some institutional mechanisms – thus earning becomes more important than learning. This all represents a life strategy to maintain their social class through migration, as is the case for the middle classes (Limpangong 2013; Mapril 2014; Torresan 2012; Waters 2005).

As such, contrary to the evidence on the highly skilled migrants' accumulation of cultural capital enabling them to continue to advance in their career in the host labour market (Al Ariss 2010; Zikic *et al.* 2010), this article has brought new perspectives into the discussions. In fact, it has gone beyond the existing scope of education (abroad) as being merely meritocratic – cultural capital is expected to bring in rewards – such as a better career and future and economic stability, as documented in the studies by Gorgoshidze (2010), King and Sondhi (2018), Marcu (2015) and Findlay *et al.* (2017). Unlike the previous research mentioned above, this article has demonstrated how education (abroad) can have meaning, rather than simply being endorsed as a merit or capital leading to an international career. It has shown that education (abroad) bears a rather complex character utilised for different purposes within the migration trajectory and, in this particular case, migration from Azerbaijan to Poland. What is more, sometimes its function ceases simply on enrollment at a university as a result of certain policies, when earning prevails over learning. Consequently, education (abroad) becomes an instrument to facilitate existing institutional mechanisms, while migrants continue to apply different strategies in relation to migration and employment in the host country. Although this study is limited, focusing only on those highly skilled migrants coming from middle-class families in Azerbaijan, the complex meanings on education (abroad) grounded in their experiences provide a valuable insight into the state-of-the-art, especially given the biographical context.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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