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# African students' emigration intentions: case studies in Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal

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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the drivers of migration intentions amongst francophone West African university students. We use an original dataset collected from more than 4000 students in Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal. Multivariate methods allow us to link the intention to migrate with the characteristics of students, with their opinion regarding mobility as well as with the perceived situation of their country of origin. We analyze intervening factors such as ethnicity, financial resources, past migration history, and social networks, and put the results into perspective with migration theory. Our results show that migration intentions are complex processes: the national context plays a role, but family support and networks are important. Generally, only a minority of students wish to leave and then only temporarily, to improve their human capital upon return.

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## 1. Introduction

Do French-speaking West African university student wish, intend, or plan to migrate after graduating, and what differentiates those who do from those who do not? This specific empirical research question connects with broader theoretical issues. As stated in 1970 by Mabogunje, one of the pioneers of migration studies, the understanding of 'expectations' or 'aspirations' is a crucial dimension for the theorization of migration as a whole (Mabogunje, 1970, p. 11). Since then, many authors have requested more studies on migration intentions (Chirkov et al., 2007; Tjaden et al., 2019; Winchie & Carment, 1989) but the issue remains under-researched. Migration scholars often favor retroactive studies, looking only at migration once it has happened and ignoring the unfolding of the migration project. One could argue that the intentions of potential migrants prior to leaving are irrelevant and that the actual move is the only phenomenon that matters. Twenty years ago Lu (1999) identified numerous inconsistencies between intentions and actions in individual migration behavior. And yet, Lu and numerous others argue that the link between intentions and action is strong and that a better understanding of migration intentions is of paramount importance for theorizing the migration process as a whole and forecasting future trends (Bahna, 2008; Docquier et al., 2014; Gubhaju & De Jong, 2009; De Jong et al., 1985; Van Dalen & Henkens, 2008). This issue touches upon fundamental contemporary debates in migration studies, including: What types of agency do migrants have (Bakewell, 2010)? What are the roles of family and social networks in shaping migration choices (Haug, 2008)? How do objective considerations regarding, for example, expected wages, interact with more subjective issues related to symbolic prestige or culture (King,

2012)? How do migration plans emerge in a context of risk and uncertainties (Williams & Baláž, 2012)?

Recently, important conceptual clarifications have been made regarding the broad category of migration aspirations (Carling & Collins, 2018). We purposefully use the term ‘intentions’ in this paper as we refer not only to an overall wish to emigrate or to ‘the conviction that leaving would be better than staying’, but to a process that combines desire, planning, and (some degree of) preparation to move abroad.

The case of students is especially relevant regarding migration intentions because students are at a stage of life where the realm of possible choices regarding the future is the most open. They can be considered to be better informed and to enjoy a higher level of human capital than the rest of the population, and they are thus in a privileged position from which to elaborate migration plans (Efonayi & Piguet, 2014; Riaño et al., 2018). The present paper addresses the case of African students in Côte d’Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal, all countries situated in French-speaking West Africa. This choice of these countries is based on preexisting collaborations with local researchers and the fact that their language and academic systems are similar enough to allow for some generalization. However, their recent histories, political systems, academic landscapes, and conditions of life differ widely, which allows us to test hypotheses regarding contextual factors that contribute to emigration intentions. African countries were also chosen because of the relative lack of research on migration intentions in the continent (DeJesus, 2018; Flahaux & de Haas, 2016). Studies on African emigration often emphasize the *consequences* of emigration (the ‘brain drain’ versus remittance debate) and the policies attempting to prevent it (the ‘fortress Europe’ debate), taking the *causes* for granted (Mondain & Diagne, 2013). There are, of course, exceptions (Beauchemin, 2015) but as van Dalen states: ‘Most brain drain studies would lead one to believe that [African] students were absolutely determined to move to the US or to Europe’ (Dalen et al., 2005, p. 767). This is precisely what this research intends to challenge.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

It is clear from the existing literature that migration is the product of a complex range of intervening social, cultural, economic, and political factors at various scales (De Haas, 2014; Massey et al., 1994; Van Hear et al., 2018), but migration intentions have rarely been addressed. We identify five key dimensions that hypothetically culminate in the formulation of a mobility project: individual characteristics, attitude toward migration, familial context, transnational networks, and perceived quality of life. In the case of students, the academic context must be added as a sixth dimension.

### 2.1. Individual characteristics

Individual characteristics such as gender, age, and human capital (Sjaastad, 1962) are traditionally put to the fore in studies on migration intentions. In that context, women, children, elders, and people with low qualifications show a lower propensity to attempt a migration project. In the case of students, the level of education can have a significant – though hard to estimate – impact: Do intentions to leave the home country increase commensurately with the level of education achieved, or do graduates with post-secondary or tertiary degrees have sufficient employment prospects at home? In line with the literature on migration motivations and intentions in psychology (De Jong & Fawcett, 1981; Tartakovsky & Schwartz, 2001), one can hypothesize that the extent to which individuals believe they can influence their own life (‘locus of control’) also impacts migration intentions (Boneva & Frieze, 2001; Chirkov et al., 2007; Winch & Carment, 1989). Finally, the links between religion, ethnicity, and migration intentions should be considered, as well as the possible push factor of discrimination against minorities.

## 2.2. Attitude toward migration

It might sound tautological to posit that individuals who view emigration in a positive way are keener to attempt an emigration project but investigating that issue is central to understanding to what extent migration intentions are related to structural constraints or to more autonomous individual decision-making processes (Ottonelli & Torresi, 2013). With that aim, we will examine whether students are more likely to express emigration intentions if they believe that emigrating will validate their competencies, enrich their life experiences, or improve their educational qualifications.

## 2.3. Familial context

The importance of the family in migration decisions is often associated with the ‘new economics of labor migration’ (NELM) (Stark, 1991). Central to this approach is the idea that the household, rather than the individual, is the decision-making unit. Migrations that might appear irrational through the lenses of individualistic approaches can be understood as rational when viewed as a collective strategy. More generally, one can assume that family support networks are especially important for students as they often lack personal financial resources. This hypothesis is in line with contemporary empirical studies of the migration decision-making process (Kok, 2010) and more specifically of student migration, which stresses the role of the family (Cairns & Smyth, 2011, p. 10; Pimpa, 2005).

## 2.4. Social networks

Building on Bourdieu’s differentiation between types of capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1978), several authors have stressed the importance of social and cultural capital as both a determinant for and a consequence of migration (Findlay, 2011). In the case of migration, social capital often takes the form of networks and transnational connections, which are considered major facilitators (Boyd, 1989; Epstein, 2008; Tilly, 2007). Four mechanisms among those mentioned by Haug (2008) appear especially relevant regarding intentions: *affinities* (relatives and friends at the place of destination may increase the tendency to migrate); *information* (information that stimulates the formation of intentions); *conflict* (conflicts within the community of origin that stimulate emigration); and *support* (family support may encourage emigration). As noted by Davis and Winters (2001, p. 10) and Waters (2006), the impact of networks can be largely gender-dependent.

Despite a significant body of literature on networks and migrations, specific links between networks and intentions remain under-researched, especially in Africa (Dalen et al., 2005), and networks are often undifferentiated between weak versus strong ties and between family versus nonfamily networks (Herman, 2006). More recently, mobility studies (Urry, 2007) have contributed to the conceptualization of migration in connection with networks by emphasizing that the very fact of moving and ‘knowing how to move’ constitutes an asset that facilitates subsequent moves (Tarrius, 1989) and that, by bridging geographical distances, new technologies might also significantly impact the way networks operate (Panagakos & Horst, 2006).

## 2.5. Quality of life

It is ‘one of the age-old truisms of migration [...] that people will always want to migrate to better themselves’ (King, 2012, p. 148), but few studies attempt to disentangle which types of dissatisfaction – or hopes for improvement – play prominent roles in migration intentions (Stinner & Van Loon, 1992). Whereas the neoclassical school of thought posited that material dimensions are central, behaviorist geographers developed the broader notion of ‘place utility’ at origin and destination (Wolpert, 1965), which accounts for all aspects of quality of life taken in the very broad sense of the socioeconomic and sociopolitical context of the country of origin. As stated long

ago by Lee (1966), it is not so much the actual situation as its perception, which must be considered in that context. We add a temporal dimension with the hypothesis that prospective improvement or degradation might play a role apart from the actual situation at the time of formulating the intention to leave. We will thus consider students' economic self-assessments, satisfaction regarding university life, housing conditions, environment, domestic political situations, and healthcare provisions, as well as how students describe the future of their country.

## 2.6. Academic context

The academic context – university resources, quality of teaching, relationship with teaching staff, nondiscriminatory evaluation practices – plays a central role in our research. According to the most basic 'vote with their feet' principle (Tiebout, 1956), dissatisfied students should tend to try improving their situation abroad, but complex mechanisms are at play. The most satisfied and enthusiastic students might also be those most attracted by the opportunities of studying abroad. Differences between academic disciplines are also at issue: the international literature suggests that some 'global' disciplines, such as economics, might offer more opportunities for mobility abroad, while others, such as law, might be more country-specific (Findlay, 2011).

## 3. Context of the universities

A questionnaire based on our hypotheses and a series of 18 expert interviews and 29 interviews with students was distributed in 2009 to a sample of university students on campuses in Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), Niamey (Niger), and Saint-Louis (Senegal). The aim of the research was not to compare countries and universities, but rather to analyze individual decision-making processes. However, specific features of the university setting in the three studied countries should be noted to better understand the context.

With approximately 54,000 students, the Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny (formerly the University of Cocody-Abidjan) is by far the largest of the three universities. Over the years its student population has steadily increased, presenting challenges in terms of infrastructure and quality of teaching. Many interviewed students expressed a perception that it is the 'university for the poor,' since there are several private universities in Côte d'Ivoire that draw students who are able to pay registration fees. At the time of the study, the repercussions of a steadily deteriorating political and economic situation in the country since 2002 were apparent: university dormitories were full, obliging many students to live in other parts of Abidjan, and only a small minority of students were receiving state-funded grants.

In Niger, Abdou Moumouni University (AMU) in Niamey is the only public university, and only a few disciplines are taught in private universities. AMU has 10,000 students and enjoys a good reputation. Approximately 25% of the students receive state-funded grants. As was the case in Abidjan, university housing was completely full at the time of the research, which forced some students to live on the outskirts of the city. Unlike the two other universities considered in this study, it is not possible to obtain a PhD or doctorate in Niger for many disciplines, so many students have to travel abroad to complete their tertiary-level education.

The Gaston Berger University of Saint-Louis in Senegal (5,000 students) is considered one of the best in the country. Since it was founded in 1990, Gaston Berger has operated a selective quota system, limiting entry to the top-rated students in Senegal, many of whom benefit from a state grant.

## 4. Dataset and methodology

The aim of our survey was to obtain a representative picture of migration intentions among the student populations of each university. The questionnaire was handed out randomly at selected

entry points on the campuses. According to the intensity of the arrivals, one out of 10, one out of 3, or all students had the opportunity to complete the survey.<sup>1</sup> A very satisfactory reply rate was reached, ranging from 90% in Niger and Senegal to 47% in Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>2</sup> A total number of 4,126 valid questionnaires were collected, 851 in Senegal, 1,509 in Niger, and 1,766 in Côte d'Ivoire. The profiles of the students (Table 1) were compared to the whole student population of each university on the basis of official statistics, revealing a high level of representation regarding age, gender, etc.

Students were asked three questions regarding the level of their migration intentions: desire,<sup>3</sup> planning,<sup>4</sup> and concrete preparatory actions<sup>5</sup> such as collecting information online, requesting matriculation at a foreign university, requesting a visa from an embassy, soliciting a recommendation letter from a professor, or contacting an emigration agency. These three levels of intensity are in line with the 'continuum of concreteness' identified by Carling and Collins regarding migration aspirations (Carling & Collins, 2018). Whereas 62% of the students expressed a desire to emigrate if they had the opportunity and whereas 61% actually had a plan to do so, only 27% had taken concrete steps. A cross-tabulation nevertheless reveals complexities: some students mention a concrete plan but no wish to emigrate, or have taken some concrete actions but do not actually plan to move.

In order to build an indicator of 'fairly serious intentions to emigrate' we created a dependent variable that takes the value 'yes' if the respondent has simultaneously expressed a desire to emigrate, has a concrete plan, and has taken at least one concrete action toward emigration.<sup>6</sup> On that basis, only 17% of the students show migration intentions. We took this indicator as the dependent variable in a logistic regression analysis (run on SPSS). Whereas nearly all students answered basic questions regarding their demographic profile, several of them did not answer questions regarding migration intentions (107 missing value,  $n = 4019$ ). Questions regarding sensitive information – such as monthly expenditures – also led to missing values. The total sample available for multivariate analysis was thus reduced to 2,775 fully completed questionnaires. The issue of missing values as well as that of social desirability leading to biased answers is methodologically challenging. The screening of our questionnaires as well as preliminary qualitative interviews conducted with students and privileged informants show however that our questions are not linked to obviously socially desirable behaviors or attitudes (intentions to migrate cannot a priori be considered desirable or not). It is clear however that a certain level of bias might remain. As a final step the variables included in the multivariate model were selected to test the hypotheses mentioned in Section 2 and to control intervening factors (Table 1).<sup>7</sup>

We control the impact of each country's specificities by including dummies in our models. We nevertheless also compute three separate national models.<sup>8</sup> The main model's pseudo-R-square is 9.8% (Cox & Snell), resp. About 16.1% (Nagelkerke) and 82.5% of the observations regarding the dependent variable are correctly predicted. The level of collinearity between the variables in the regression as well as bias regarding missing values were systematically tested.<sup>9</sup>

In order to collect additional information and to foster the interpretation of the quantitative results, 47 qualitative interviews were held with students of various disciplines who were at an advanced point in their studies and therefore familiar with the situation at their university. This allowed the results to be further interpreted and additional information to be collected.

## 5. Results

An initial prominent result of this study is that only a minority of students show serious intentions to emigrate. These results can be linked to the fact that francophone West African students in pursuit of higher education abroad only have a limited number of countries to choose from. Nevertheless, this clearly contradicts the popular 'Northern' notion of the 'Southern' youth who feels an unbearable pressure to emigrate associated with a desire for 'flight' or 'no-return' migration. This is a fear-based stereotype that is common in Western governments and administrations (Schmid, 2010) and within academia despite the critics of this 'myth of invasion' by numerous

**Table 1.** Sample distribution (N = 2775).

		N	(%)
<b>Outcome variable</b>			
Migration intentions	No	2271	(81.8)
	Yes	504	(18.2)
<b>Independant variables</b>			
<b>Country</b>			
	Côte-d'Ivoire	1313	(47.3)
	Niger	962	(34.7)
	Senegal	500	(18)
<b>Individual characteristics</b>			
Gender	women	709	(25.5)
	men	2066	(74.5)
Age (years)	24.4 (mean)	17 (min)	46 (max)
<b>Locus of control ('My actions do influence my life')</b>			
	yes	2327	(83.9)
	no	448	(16.1)
<b>Childhood context</b>			
	Village	588	(21.2)
	Small town	834	(30.1)
	Large town	1353	(48.8)
<b>Family</b>			
Civil Status	married	152	(5.5)
	single	2623	(94.5)
The student has children	yes	247	(8.9)
	no	2528	(91.1)
Eldest son or daughter (or only child)	yes	747	(26.9)
	no	2028	(73.1)
<b>Family attitude twd. migration</b>			
	Neutral	1848	(66.6)
	Encourage	844	(30.4)
	Discourage	83	(3)
<b>Economic context</b>			
<b>Rating of the own resources to finance the studies</b>			
	Insufficient	1624	(58.5)
	Sufficient	790	(28.5)
	More than sufficient	361	(13)
<b>Economic situation improved in recent years</b>			
	yes	1390	(50.1)
	no	1385	(49.9)
<b>Sociocultural context</b>			
<b>Religious practice</b>			
	Muslim	1591	(57.3)
	No religious practice	179	(6.5)
	Christian	1005	(36.2)
<b>Belongs to the religious majority</b>			
	yes	2326	(83.8)
	no	449	(16.2)
<b>Belongs to the ethnic majority</b>			
	yes	1929	(69.5)
	no	846	(30.5)
<b>Migration brings a better quality of life</b>			
	yes	880	(31.7)
	no	1895	(68.3)
<b>Academic context</b>			
<b>Field of study</b>			
Social sciences		611	(22)
Economics		319	(11.5)
Humanities		628	(22.6)
Health sciences		225	(8.1)
Technical/Natural sciences		499	(18)
Law		493	(17.8)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	N	(%)
<b>Level of study (current highest diploma)</b>		
BAC/A-level	962	(34.7)
Bachelor	1541	(55.5)
Master	272	(9.8)
<b>Years of study were lost due to University closure etc.</b>		
yes	1227	(44.2)
no	1548	(55.8)
<b>Satisfaction with current studies (% yes)</b>		
Quality of teaching	1529	(55.1)
Relations with teaching staff	1713	(61.7)
Interest of the field of study	2255	(81.3)
Gender equality	1861	(67.1)
Resource of the faculty	641	(23.1)
PhD opportunities	940	(33.9)
Overall possibilities to study without obstacles	954	(34.4)
<b>Opinion on migration (% yes)</b>		
Migration is a life enrichment	1626	(58.6)
Migration brings social consideration	1126	(40.6)
Migration brings professional recognition	1555	(56)
Migration allows to acquire better diplomas	1577	(56.8)
<b>Networks &amp; Transnational connections (% yes)</b>		
Student has stayed abroad	649	(23.4)
Student has family members abroad	1777	(64)
Student has friends abroad	1098	(39.6)
ICTs facilitate migration	2271	(81.8)

scholars (Adepoju & Appleyard, 1996; De Haas, 2008; Flahaux & de Haas, 2016; Hamilton, 1999). Another interesting result that we will revisit is that among the students who do have a plan to leave, most want to do so only temporarily in order to acquire a university degree before returning home. Our logistic regression allows us to identify the main drivers of these migration intentions. The coefficients are presented in Table 2. We will comment on the main results regarding our hypotheses before outlining an overall framework of explanation.

### 5.1. National specificities

Migration intentions differ strongly between countries. While in Côte d'Ivoire 16% of the students have migration intentions, the odds ratios of the logistic regression indicate a lower propensity in Niger ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.588$ ) and higher propensity in Senegal ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.555$ ). This difference is not a surprise considering the economic and political contrasts between the three countries. In accordance with the 'migration hump' hypothesis (De Haas, 2007), a low level of development corresponds to a low level of incentives, and opportunities to emigrate should induce limited migration intentions. This is confirmed by our ranking: according to the Human Development Index 2010, Niger ranks 167, Côte d'Ivoire 149, and Senegal 144.<sup>10</sup> In Niger, the qualitative interviews with students and experts confirmed this point and added the geographical enclosure of the country as precluding international connections, while the opposite was true for Senegal. In addition, still on the basis of qualitative interviews, Senegalese students appeared especially confident regarding opportunities for moving abroad due to the good reputation of their university. As the separate national models show, the idea that returns from migration brings prestige also appears to be an important driver of migration intentions in Senegal ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.706$ ) while it is not significant in other countries. The contrasting situation in Côte d'Ivoire might explain the country's middle position: on the one hand, it has a recent history of immigration rather than emigration, and the good reputation of its universities has attracted numerous foreign students as well as retained domestic ones. On the other hand, recent political turmoil including a civil war might have acted as push factors.



The 'voting with their feet' hypothesis – in which an individual's dissatisfaction regarding *quality of life* leads to emigration plans – is clearly rejected. This purported relationship is even shown to be the reverse for students in Senegal, and for women in general in all three countries. These counter-intuitive results regarding the traditional push-pull migration theory might indicate that the migration intentions of students have more to do with a proactive project than a flight from unsatisfactory living conditions. The second-factor score, *confidence in the future*, seems to play a role more in line with the push-pull theory, where an increase in the confidence index leads to a decrease in emigration intentions ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.847$ ). Overall, those most likely to emigrate do not necessarily rate their current quality of life as low but are rather those who fear the future deterioration of their country's political or economic situation.

#### 5.4. Social networks

An important feature of our study was the ability to differentiate between types of networks abroad that might affect migration intentions as well as to measure the impact of past moves on future intentions to migrate. This analysis confirms that an existing family network abroad has a significant impact on migration intentions ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.600$ ) as well as an international network in general. This impact is even stronger for women, who might be more dependent on external support in order to consider migration. A good relationship with the teaching staff at the home university is another form of social capital that tendentially<sup>13</sup> impacts positively on migration intentions ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.238$ ). The qualitative interviews show that professors encourage their best students – with whom they have good relations – to pursue their studies abroad. Furthermore, prior experience abroad has a tendentially positive stimulating impact ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.256$ ). Students who consider that new technologies of information and communications (NTIC) facilitate migration are also more likely to formulate migration intentions ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.467$ ).

These results confirm that assets in the form of support networks abroad, knowledge of migration due to past experiences, and familiarity with distance-bridging technologies is all associated with a stronger commitment to migration. It would nevertheless be premature to assume that migration itself always constitutes a self-reinforcing mechanism: students who have migrated from villages or small towns counterintuitively manifest a lower level of intention to migrate further than those from cities. It seems here that an early confrontation with 'urban modernity' increases migration aspirations, whereas successful moves from rural to urban locations generally decrease subsequent migration aspirations.

#### 5.5. Religion and ethnicity

The majority or minority religious affiliation does not impact a student's intentions to migrate, nor does belonging to a specific ethnic group or ethnic majority or minority. This result also holds in national logistic regression models where ethnic groups were differentiated. Considering the current media discourse, in which religion and ethnicity are often considered major factors of differentiations between groups, this result is well worth noting. This is even more relevant in Africa, where the ethnic lens has been a tool of the colonial gaze for several centuries. Our results are coherent with those of Ndione (2008) who found no correlation between migration behavior and ethnicity in Senegal. He explains this by the fact that migration behaviors, which were specific to certain cultural groups in the past, are now transversal among a large proportion of the population.

### 6. Discussion and overall framework of explanation

The explanatory framework which emerges from our empirical results is synthesized in [Figure 1](#). Migration intentions are linked not so much to current dissatisfaction with the socioeconomic and

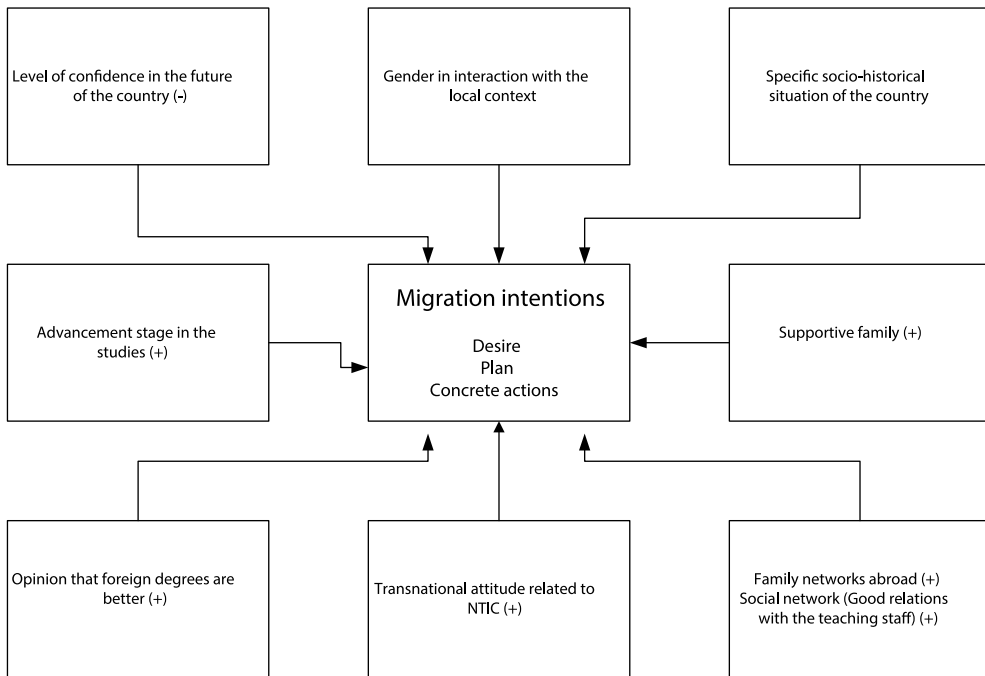


Figure 1. Main factors related to migration intentions.

political situation as they are to the level of confidence in the future of the national economy and political institutions. Planning to emigrate has thus more to do with a proactive strategy than with a reactive strategy regarding existing push or pull factors. The family support dimension emerges as a strong decisive factor: a supportive family in the home country is for many a precondition for considering migration and having an existing familial network outside the country is common for those most resolved to emigrate. We conclude by looking at how well the different theoretical propositions<sup>14</sup> that were used to build our framework of hypotheses work when set next to our results.

The neoclassical focus on earning differentials clearly does not resonate in the case of African student migration. The most deprived are not those who feel the strongest incentive to migrate. Even students who believe that migration could improve their economic situation are no more likely to express migration intentions. Seen as an enlargement of the neoclassical framework, the 'new economics of labor migration' appear more relevant for interpreting our case: its emphasis on the centrality of the familial household as a unit of reference for migration intentions is largely corroborated.

Behaviorist geographers, as well as Lee's push-pull model, broadened the scope of the neoclassical theory by stressing the importance of subjective perceptions of the quality of life at home as central for explaining migration. Although it might seem all too obvious that dissatisfied people are the most likely to consider emigrating, this is not confirmed by our results. In certain cases, the relation is even inverted: migration is most attractive to students who are more satisfied, ambitious, or enthusiastic. In somewhat symmetrical findings, the prospect of an improved quality of life abroad does not necessarily act as a pull factor. Even students who think that their lives would improve by emigrating do not always show stronger intentions of migration. This counterintuitive result might be linked to the fact that most students in our case studies see migration as a temporary move. It might also be explained by the gap that emerges between satisfaction at the time of the study, which does not influence migration decisions, and prospects for the future, which, if

unpromising, appear to significantly increase the desire to leave. This ‘lagged’ apprehension is rarely mentioned in existing theories of migration and should definitely be kept in mind for future empirical research and theorization.

The human capital approach is highly relevant in our case: students clearly see migration more as a way to increase their capital upon return than as a way to find employment abroad. This is illustrated by the fact that while, on the whole, students who think they could improve their situation abroad do not show a higher propensity to leave, those who consider degrees from foreign universities more valuable than domestic degrees clearly do. It remains surprising to us, with respect to the human capital approach, that the field of study appears to play no role in increasing or reducing migration intentions. This contradicts the hypothesis that a foreign degree might be more valuable in some disciplines, such as economics, than in others, such as the social sciences. One possible explanation emerges from the qualitative interviews: the value of a foreign degree appears to be symbolic – allowing entry to *any* profession, including the public sector – rather than related to the certification of specific competencies in a particular discipline.

Although the social psychology framework appears useful for interpreting the students’ stated motivations for migration, linking them with personal development aspirations and materialism rather than self-preservation or a desire for security, individual characteristics, and personality traits seem to play no role in migration intentions in our study. Individual biographies, on the other hand, seem quite important in shaping future attitudes: prior international migration experience, for example, leads to an increase in migration intentions, which also sustains the hypothesis that knowing how to move is a form of capital that facilitates further migration. Our results also allow for differentiation within the classic network hypothesis: First, we show that networks have an impact not only on actual migration – as is already well known – but also on migration intentions. Second, we show that, if family networks play an important role in stimulating migration intentions, non-family networks (such as friends) abroad have a less sensitive impact. If one qualifies the family network as stronger than other support networks, this reveals an interesting ‘strength of strong ties’ phenomenon (Granovetter, 1983). Our hypothesis is that family networks play a role in the early stages of forming migration intentions, whereas weaker networks play a role at a later stage. Specific domestic networks also appear to play a role, as in the example of positive relations between students and university staff fostering migration intentions.

The gender dimension of migration also appears relevant. On the one hand, a simple differentiation between men and women does not adhere to the stereotype that women are systematically less prone to emigrate – in Senegal, for example, women show higher levels of migration intentions than men – but on the other hand, gender appears to interact with other factors in a specific way. This is exemplified by the fact that, for women, a lost year of study decreases the inclination to emigrate, as it makes it more difficult to combine the timetable of studies abroad with the timetables of family formation and reproduction in the home country.

## 7. Conclusion

The general picture that emerges from our research contrasts strongly with the stereotypical idea that the sole dream of young Africans is to migrate definitively to Western countries due to an individualistic feeling of dissatisfaction at home and lured by the lights of imaginary paradises. The migration intentions invoked by the thousands of students whom we interviewed appear, on the contrary, mainly motivated by rational awareness of the possibilities offered by migration and of the challenges that this implies. As stated by Carling and Collins (2018, p. 916): ‘Individual attitudes towards migration cannot be amicably divorced from those that are manifest in the social context.’ On a theoretical level, this is fully in line with recent conceptualizations of migration at the interplay of aspirations and capabilities (Carling & Collins, 2018; De Haas, 2014) and with attempts to move beyond the push-pull model (Van Hear et al., 2018). This opens up avenues for research that might also overcome the limitations of this paper: refined indicators of migration intentions, targeted

study groups rather than a wide group of diverse students, more attention paid to class and gender issues, and a systematic sampling procedure is among the possible improvements. Our religious and ethnic indicators also remained limited, as we did not measure variations in the intensity of religious practices or ethnic affiliations. The study would also benefit from a complementary comparison of students who have completed their studies abroad with those who have not.

Most of the students we surveyed wish to migrate temporarily in order to improve their human capital at home and to acquire education abroad which will be efficiently valued on the domestic labor market. However, pursuing a mobility project remains a luxury. Among the students we spoke with, only a minority will have the opportunity of studying abroad. In the global market for talent that is currently emerging, African students are often discriminated against. Due to financial constraints and suspicious immigration policies, their path to advanced studies abroad is often severely restricted. May our study contribute to showing policymakers that these students should not be treated as threats to immigration regimes but rather as partners in the circulation of knowledge and promotion of international development.

## Notes

1. In the case of Senegal, due to administrative issues, the questionnaire was distributed in the students' apartments. Those who agreed to answer received a pen as well as a writing pad. The questionnaire was self-administered but students had the opportunity to get help.
2. These differences can be explained by the setting of the distribution and the size of the universities. In Côte d'Ivoire, because of the large size of the campus (54,000 students), the questionnaire was handed out to students entering the campus and they were asked to give it back immediately. In Senegal (5,000 students) the questionnaire was handed out and collected directly in students' apartments. In Niger (10,000 students) the questionnaire was handed out at entry points to the campus with the opportunity to give it back later.
3. 'If you had this opportunity, would you like to live abroad in a more or less near future?' (Si vous en aviez la possibilité, souhaiteriez-vous résider dans un avenir plus ou moins proche à l'étranger?).
4. 'Do you have a precise plan to live abroad?' (Avez-vous un projet précis pour aller vivre à l'étranger?).
5. 'Did you already take actions in order to move?' (Avez-vous déjà fait des démarches pour partir?).
6. In order to test the robustness of our results, similar analyses were conducted with other dependent variables: other binary variables or ranked multivariate indicators. Gains in quality of prediction were marginal and the list of significant independent variables remained fairly stable. This supported our choice to simplify the analysis by considering a binary variable.
7. The full specifications of the variables as well as the original formulation of the questions can be found in the research report: <https://libra.unine.ch/export/DL/42038.pdf>. We did not add or suppress variables with low levels of contribution (stepwise modeling). The justification is that we do not attempt to build a prediction model but to test the role of each variables on migration intentions.
8. Two separate models for men and women were also computed. The results of these models can be accessed here: <https://libra.unine.ch/export/DL/42038.pdf>. Technically, this allows taking into account possible interaction effects between country characteristics and other variables.
9. An issue of collinearity was detected concerning the material situation of the students, originally rated using three different indicators. We chose to keep one indicator only: satisfaction regarding financial resources.
10. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/> (consulted on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020).
11. Principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation. Factor 1 explains 30% and factor 2 explains 13% of the variance.
12. Two additional models – not presented in the tables – were computed to check the robustness of the results. One does not use factor scores to describe confidence in the future and quality of life but uses original variables, the other does not include the six variables describing the individual attitudes toward studying abroad, as these might interact with other characteristics. The results of these two models did not differ substantially from the main models.
13. We use 'tendentially' to point to results that are significant with a p-value between 0.05 and 0.1.
14. For details of these migration theories, see Massey et al. (1993) and Piguet (2018).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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