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POLITICAL FACTORS AND STUDENT AGENCY IN THE MOBILITY PROCESS: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL PHD STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

[1]Yin M and [2]Yeakey C. C

Article Info

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of political factors on international student mobility, specifically on the mobility of international PhD students from Turkey studying in the UK. The article utilizes the structuration theory and capability approach to understand how political factors can either enhance or inhibit a student's capabilities to become mobile. The study examines the factors shaping mobility decisions at different levels to explain the process of human mobility. The study concludes that an appealing political environment is necessary to retain highly educated individuals and that political factors play a crucial role, particularly for those coming from countries experiencing political tension and conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Student mobility is never a neutral act – something that "just happens". Rather, it is filled with social, cultural and political meaning. Therefore, [it] is a worthy subject of study' (Brooks & Waters, 2011, p. 130).

International student mobility (ISM) refers to the mobility of individuals who cross borders for study and is part of the increasing internationalisation of higher education, often used as a stepping-stone for a career abroad (López-Duarte et al., 2021; OECD, 2006). Mobility and migration can be seen as two sides of the same coin (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Consequently, some researchers have adopted the term 'migration' (e.g., Beine et al., 2013; Butcher, 2004; King, 2002), whilst others prefer to use 'mobility' (e.g., Findlay et al., 2006; King et al., 2010; OECD, 2021) for international student flows. Aligned with the aim of our study, we adopt the term 'mobility', which represents a process.

With ISM worldwide increasing faster than overall international mobility, many countries are concerned about losing educated people and, hence, this has received increasing attention in recent years (King et al., 2010; OECD, 2021). The estimated two million international students in 2000 rose to 6.1 million in 2019 and is anticipated to reach 7.2 million by 2025. Between 1998 and 2019, ISM grew on average 5.5% per year (OECD, 2021), whereas the rate of increase in overall mobility was 3.6% per year (IOM, 2019). ISM is regarded as an important component of highly educated migration (Bryla, 2019; Levatino, 2014; MPG, 2012; Tremblay, 2004, p. 3). It can serve, first, to meet demands by governments for recruitment as international students are more likely to find employment opportunities in the global labour market, thereby contributing to innovation and economic performance worldwide and addressing shortages in professional labour markets, particularly in those countries experiencing an ageing population (OECD, 2021). ISM can also serve as a 'precursor of future migrations',

[1] Westminster Business School, University of Westminster, London, UK
[2] Westminster Business School, University of Westminster, London, UK

reflecting the shifting role of higher education as a distinct form of migration, termed by Brunner (2022) *edugration*—a combination of 'education' and 'migration', due to students' young age, language skills and high levels of human/economic capital, which make them ideal migrants (Scott et al., 2015).

Despite their growing volume worldwide and recognition of their role in the knowledge-based economy, the mobility of international students remains a relatively neglected subject area (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Page & Chahboun, 2019). The exit or non-return of doctoral researchers has been particularly overlooked, so that their mobility process is not well understood and of especial concern (Beine et al., 2013; Czaika & Toma, 2015; Pasztor, 2015).

This paper focuses on ISM and draws on a study evaluating the influence of political factors on international student mobility in higher education, with the example of international PhD students from Turkey coming to the United Kingdom, the second major destination country in Europe for these students after Germany (HESA, 2021). A distinct feature of the study is the theoretical framework, which applies structuration theory (ST) and the capability approach (CA) to provide a new lens for understanding how political factors enhance or inhibit students' capabilities to become mobile. Mobility is thus conceptualised to encompass the role played by structural and agency factors, as well as the extent to which PhD students possess the capabilities to become mobile.

MOBILITY, POLITICAL FACTORS AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS FROM TURKEY

An important debate concerning ISM is whether the terms 'migration' or 'mobility' most appropriately identify such flows of people. According to some scholars (e.g., King, 2002, p. 90), there is a 'never-straightforward boundary between migration and mobility', whilst Murphy-Lejeune (2002, p. 2) claims that 'migration and mobility are envisaged as two facets of the same phenomenon'. Some scholars opt for the term 'migration' (Beine et al., 2013) by highlighting the duration time in a host country, so aligning with the United Nations (UN) definition referring to whether a student remains in a host country for a minimum of 12 months. Others prefer the term 'mobility' (King et al., 2010) for international student flows due to globalisation and technological advancement, as well as improved transportation links (Castles, 2010). The reasons for choosing the term 'mobility' in this research relate, first, to the aim of capturing the process rather than the outcome, to understand whether the pursuit of participants' career and life plans was envisaged in Turkey or another country. Secondly, the choice to move is increasingly due to globalisation and advances in technology, taking advantage of opportunities as they arise, rather than becoming a 'one-way ticket' (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, p. 2).

From the sending country perspective, political factors found to impact on student mobility include: political freedom, such as freedom of speech, particularly in academia (Cheung & Xu, 2015; Nighia, 2019; Riemsdijk & Wang, 2017); political discrimination; restrictive government policies (Ploner & Nada, 2019); conflicts between different ethnic groups; government intolerance of opposition; and media interference (Panahi, 2012). In addition, studies highlight how unsatisfactory social norms can underly the wish to escape from home-country pressure to obtain freedom of lifestyle (Hazen & Alberts, 2006). From a host-country perspective, migration policies play a significant role in ISM (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Li et al., 2019; UUK, 2014; Yin & Yeakey, 2019). In addition, attitudes towards foreigners can be important factors in attracting and retaining international students (Choudaha, 2017; Lomer, 2018). Several studies (e.g., Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Aydin et al., 2021) have shown that political factors play a salient role, particularly for those coming from countries where political tension and conflict is high, with increasingly restrictive government policies.

The most common reasons for coming to the United Kingdom have been work and study, followed by family and humanitarian protection; however, by 2018, following the results of the 2016 referendum to leave the European Union (EU), study has become the primary driver (ONS, 2020). In the academic year 2019/2020, international students from non-EU countries comprised 80% of the total coming to the United Kingdom (Migration Observatory, 2021). Whilst earlier studies tended to focus on students from China or India, the focus here is on PhD students in the United Kingdom from Turkey, which became a target market in 2013 (HM Government, 2013). There has been little research conducted on these students, especially at doctorate level, so their mobility

is not clearly understood—although, with 47 546 students studying abroad (HESA, 2021), Turkey is a major sending country, with the most popular destination country being the United States, followed by Germany and the United Kingdom. The political atmosphere and crackdown on freedoms in Turkey, particularly after the military coup in 2016, have not only led to increasing numbers of foreign higher education applications from students in Turkey, but also pushed academics into either leaving or cancelling their return plans (Baser et al., 2017), in an exodus that 'might be as big as the scientists' exodus from Nazi Germany' (Bucak, 2016).

According to the World Press Freedom Index (2021), Turkey has moved from a partly free to an unfree country owing to the policies and practices of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) running the government since 2002. President Erdogan has redefined terrorism as any opposing voice, covering academics, journalists, authors and Members of Parliament (MPs) regardless of their allegiance, with his words: 'It is not only the person who pulls the trigger, but those who made that possible who should also be defined as terrorists' (Amnesty International, 2017). Turkish academics who signed a petition about halting violence against Kurdish civilians were accused by the government of promulgating propaganda for terrorist organisations, with many subjected to detention on criminal charges and/or travel bans (Baser et al., 2017). After the attempted military coup in July 2016, more academics, writers and journalists faced government persecution, from intimidation to prosecution, resulting in increasing authoritarianism and subsequent ongoing protests in Turkey against government control over higher education institutions and attacks on women's rights. In January 2021, following student protests against President Erdogan's appointment of a non-elected rector to Bogazici University to impose government control over the institution, hundreds were arrested, some facing criminal investigation (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In March 2021, Turkey withdrew from the Council of Europe Convention, known as the Istanbul Convention, aimed at combatting violence against women and domestic violence and signed by all EU countries in 2012. According to the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović: 'At a time when femicide and other forms of violence against women are on the rise in the country, Turkey should not step back and reduce its tools to fight against this scourge' (Council of Europe, 2021). Consequently, highly educated individuals from Turkey have been continuously increasing in number in Western Europe over the last decade as many, both inside and outside of academia, have left to re-establish their lives in a new country (Aydin et al., 2021; Geurts et al., 2021).

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Mobility decisions are shaped by structural and agency factors at different levels. Structuration theory provides a framework for explaining the process of human mobility through the concept of 'duality of structure', which presupposes the interdependence and interrelatedness of macro (structure) and micro (agency) factors (de Haas, 2014; Giddens, 1984; Healey, 2006; Wolfel, 2002). As this process cannot be understood without including the broader context in which social action takes place, the researcher 'needs to analyse the collective behaviour of human beings and how this is linked to social structures and institutions' (Castles, 2012, p. 8). In involving human beings, the framework also needs to embrace individual aspirations and capabilities (Anderson & Keith, 2014; Levatino, 2014; Schevel, 2015), and for this reason draws on the capability approach, which considers well-being and development according to individuals' capabilities (freedoms) and functionings (Sen, 2005). Through the lens of the capability approach, capabilities are not just seen as abilities residing inside a person, but as opportunities and freedoms derived from a combination of personal abilities and the political, economic and social environment (Nussbaum, 2003). Further, whilst both the structuration and capability approaches provide flexible frameworks, the concepts of agency, power and freedom are similar under both lenses so that both can be integrated to enrich understanding of the dynamic link between agency and structure (Deneulin & McGregor, 2010).

In both theories, the notion of agency is based on active rather than passive actors, who are capable, knowledgeable and purposeful, with the ability to make choices and pursue and realise their goals (Briones, 2013). PhD students are such social actors, aware of their goals and the factors constraining their freedom to achieve these in terms of where they work and live after graduation. Whilst capability refers to an individual's freedom to

choose between different ways of living, structuration theory assumes a level of freedom as 'agency is always able to act otherwise' (Bakewell, 2010; Giddens, 1984, p. 14; Sen, 2005). Education, including international higher education, expands freedoms or, in other words, the capabilities of students in terms of knowledge and skills and their awareness of alternative lifestyles, which can lead to increasing aspirations for mobility (de Haas, 2014; Lo, 2019). Thus, despite structural constraints, international students continue to practise agency, negotiating constraining factors, such as visa restrictions and funding, so as not to return home against their wishes (de Haas, 2011).

The notion of power is important to explaining mobility, pertaining to an agent's 'capacity to make a difference' or the human capacity to perform within structures in order to reach desirable outcomes (Giddens, 1984, p. 14). Similarly, through capabilities (ability to achieve) and functionings (achievement), as defined in the capability approach, students can develop and expand their choices (Thorburn, 2015; Tomlinson, 2021). Thus power, defined in structuration theory as transformative capability, is in accord with the developmental aspect of the capability approach (Gaventa, 2003). If students lose power or the capability to influence society due to particular conditions, they lose their agent status. Under these circumstances, moving into another country becomes an opportunity to regain power. Panahi's (2012) research findings on the migration of Iranian academics also point to the significance of power in terms of the value of academics who, through their capabilities, create change in society. If a society does not allow students to use their capabilities to forge change, then they start seeking opportunities in other countries where they can; once they find a country offering to use their capabilities, they will leave home and become mobile. Giddens (1984) regards all agents as having power but not at the same level; some have more because they are empowered by structural factors to differing degrees.

Our framework captures such human diversity (Lo, 2019), extending the debate on international student mobility beyond an economic perspective by providing insights into how political factors at the macro (structural) level enhance or inhibit students' capabilities to become mobile at the micro (agency) level (Briones, 2013; Cenci, 2015). Mobility is in this respect defined as the outcome of achieving the enhancement of capabilities or, in other words, freedom and hence fostering well-being (Figure 1).

METHODOLOGY

As our study focuses on students' experiences, considerations and mobility decisions, with the aim of understanding and explaining their underlying rationale, a qualitative approach was adopted, allowing for the collection of rich and nuanced data. To provide a context, semi-structured in-depth interviews were first conducted with two professors from Turkey in the United Kingdom and three international education experts based in London. These were followed by interviews with 40 social science and science PhD students from 17 universities in the United Kingdom, the majority being social science students in the third or fourth year of their studies. More than half (58%) were either funded by UK institutions or self-funded,

STRUCTURE

F I G U R E 1 Political factors impacting on students' capabilities to become mobile.

with the remainder funded by the Turkish government. In terms of demographic characteristics, the majority of the 40 students were single and between 25 and 35 years of age, almost half were female and one-quarter of Kurdish origin, whilst six described themselves as gay. The details of the participants are given in Tables 1 and 2. Participants were selected, to start with, by using university websites to obtain personal contact details. In addition, through social media, a large number of the participants were accessed, in particular through posting details of the research on the Facebook pages of relevant Turkish societies. The sampling was restricted to identifying members of the population of interest (Bryman & Bell, 2015), ensuring that there was sufficient diversity of participants (Liamputtong, 2010). Despite a substantial number of participants being easily

contactable through university PhD websites, LinkedIn and social media, many refused to participate due to the crackdown on freedom of speech in Turkey. Relying on these methods alone, it was, therefore, difficult to recruit a sufficient number. The snowballing technique was, as a result, a necessary strategy (Maginn, 2007) for recruiting participants, whilst also engendering the participants' trust, as those recommended for interview would know that the intentions of the referee, and by implication the researcher, were genuine. As a consequence, participants were willing to share their experiences and views openly, thus contributing valuable information to this research.

The main selection criterion was visa status; only Turkish passport holders who had come to the United Kingdom with a student visa were approached. Other criteria included demographics (age, gender, relationship status, ethnicity) and educational factors (field of study, year of study, funding source) in order to evaluate and compare international students' mobility plans and elicit whether mobility varied according to these criteria. Interviews were conducted between May and August 2018 in offices, canteens, the British Library and coffee shops. A pilot study was carried out at the start, the main outcome of which was the decision to undertake the interviews where possible in English. As a result, at the beginning of each interview it was explained to the interviewee that, whilst English was preferable, they were entitled to use Turkish. Two out of 45 participants preferred to use the Turkish language and the transcripts were subsequently translated from Turkish into English. All interviewees were anonymised, for instance by using pseudonyms.

NVivo 10 software facilitated the coding process and helped ensure the quality and efficiency of the data analysis. Five main themes were identified, including: political discrimination; political freedom; UK migration policies; political restrictions; and restrictive socio-cultural norms and policies. An example of the coding process is given in Table 3.

Demographic factors	**Relationship status**	**Gender**	**Ethnicity**	**Age**
	Single: 23 Married: 7 Relationship: 6 Engaged: 2 Complicated: 2	Female: 19 Male: 21	Turkish: 30 Kurdish: 9 Mixed: 1	25–29 years: 18 30–35 years: 17 >35 years: 5
Educational factors	**Field of study**	**Funding**		**Year of study**
	Science: 11 Social Science: 29	Scholarship from Turkey: 17 Scholarship from UK: 17 Self-funding: 6		1st year: 5 2nd year: 8 3rd year: 11 4th year: 16

TABLE 2 Profiles of professors and international education experts

Name	Position	Location
Ahsen	Doctor/International Partnership Coordinator	London
Ismail	Turkish Education Official	London
Seckin	Manager of Foreign Education Academy	Istanbul
Cenk	Professor/Social Science	London
Taner	Professor/Social Science	London

TABLE 1 Profiles of PhD students

Political discrimination and employment (occupational) capability

The political situation also affects other things, such as career opportunities, economy – real things, tangible things.

(Deniz)

Almost all participants repeatedly expressed such sentiments as 'the lack of job security', 'want a secure job' and 'fear of finding a job' if they returned to Turkey. Employment opportunities, whilst often considered as economic factors (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Hazen & Alberts, 2006), were attributable rather to the political atmosphere in Turkey, indicating the highly politicised nature of the economy. According to many participants, political discrimination in Turkey limits employment opportunities for those not supporting the government and its policies, fostering a fear of being unemployed:

The government right now… would only hire people who are a hundred per cent similar to themselves and like, whenever I disagreed, they would not want me.

(Izge)

Political situation… there are some operations in universities, so people are protestors, researchers and others started losing their jobs and there is no job security in Turkey.

(Halis)

I have seen some other friends who returned back to Turkey and they are just waiting for their jobs or lost their jobs even though they are very well educated… The politics… you are very weak.

(Zeliha)

Students funded by the Turkish government were under even greater pressure. Some student PhD topics, such as homophobia, the Kurdish issue or prison conditions in Turkey, are not subjects the Turkish government is keen on having raised. Hence, students undertaking such controversial PhDs and funded by the government might report different themes in order to keep their scholarships (Semih). One (Meral) removed some findings to safeguard herself and her participants.

Many students stressed how being an academic means having freedom of speech, as expressed by Tolga and Esra:

I wanted to do my work in a research environment that can really nourish your ability to do things… So, I would say academic freedom was my main motivation… I do not think that my critical approach has a place to be nourished in Turkey at the moment. (Tolga)

There's huge pressure on academics and being an academic is being independent actually, like, cause, being an academic requires thinking, right? And when you have repression you cannot be productive.

(Esra)

For these students, lacking political freedom, in particular academic freedom, means they cannot enhance their academic capabilities and are thus unable to influence society.

Migration policies of the United Kingdom and capability to be an active citizen

In the UK they want you to, like, get out after your PhD, because they are unwelcoming.

(Emel)

UK policies towards students, including work and stay permit legislation, are often described by participants as unfavourable compared to other countries, particularly Australia, Canada and the United States:

They just want you to come here and pay the fee, get your money and get your diploma and then send you back… I searched a lot… in those countries there's no stupid restrictions. Like, you did your masters, PhD, but you cannot work here. Come on! I get my masters and at least I should get my experience, right?

But in Canada, if you do a PhD, you can get citizenship.

(Nuri)

In addition to migration policies, the host country's perception of foreigners played a major role in students' mobility plans, as explained by an international student expert:

You cannot just only think about a job, you also need to think about which country… Which one is going to be more hospitable? Which one is going to be more friendly?
(Dr Ahsen)

According to many students, particularly after Brexit, there has been a growing sense of foreigners being unwelcome in the United Kingdom and of widespread hostility towards immigrants, discouraging their remaining. Restrictions on work and residence permits, along with a hostile environment, have led the majority to consider that, if they were to stay in the United Kingdom, they would be unable to participate in economic, social and political life and thus develop and fulfil active citizen capabilities. Even if succeeding in obtaining work and residence permits, they would be perceived as either immigrants or second-class citizens.

An interesting finding was that many students were optimistic about acquiring visas/work permits from third countries, including the United States and Canada. Moreover, most of those funded (65%) by the Turkish government believed they would find a way not to return to Turkey, as illustrated in the following:

When I signed this contract with the Turkish government, I was thinking that okay, we are just signing the agreement, but I'm gonna find a way not to go back to Turkey.
(Baran)

Those in receipt of government funding are obliged to return to Turkey to serve for a specified number of years in higher education institutions, or pay back a significant amount if they choose to remain abroad. Their ways of overcoming this were various, with some relying on financial support from family to pay back the scholarship, whilst others applied for a business visa, postdoctoral and/or guest lecturer position. Some reported that their scholarship would be cancelled if they revealed any political involvement against the Turkish government and, hence, they would not have to undertake compulsory service back home or pay back the money they had already received. One described how many funded students have been sharing their experiences of steps to be followed to remain abroad through social media networks, thus exercising agency to challenge inhibiting factors.

Political restrictions on the capability of expression of identity

As a woman you are freer here.
(Meral)

My Kurdish background and my Kurdish identity play a significant role in my decision to stay abroad, obviously.
(Baran)

Here, I can tell anyone that I am gay, because I feel myself protected, but in Turkey I would not tell everyone. There is no law protecting you from hate crime in Turkey.
(Yuksel, homosexual)

The majority of the females and almost all the Kurdish and gay students had no plans to return to Turkey due to insecurity, inequality and discrimination issues, using such expressions as ‘feeling more free’ or ‘feeling safer’ in the United Kingdom. Female students frequently spoke about how strict gender roles, gender inequality and the crackdown on women's rights in Turkey limit their independence and freedom:

They are so independent here. Women can go out, they can drink, they can have friends of the opposite sex… they can work until late… Here, everything is more equal. And there is not a distinction between women's and men's jobs.
(Asli)

According to many, the suppression of women's rights has become worse with the current government's restrictions on gender equality and identity roles:

Quotes from Erdogan's speeches… like: ‘Of course man and woman are not the same biologically – you know – socially and that a woman's position in society is being the mother’. To me, this is one of the stupidest statements that anyone can make, especially a politician! Right?
(Huriye)

Feeling ‘free as a woman’ emerged as a common theme in female respondents' narratives, with almost all referring to lack of freedom or inability to exploit their capabilities (freedoms) back home.

Likewise, gay individuals value residing somewhere where they can pursue their sexual identity freely and comfortably. The majority stated that they are forced to hide their sexual preference, as one student put it:

I am discreet gay and because of this reason in the UK I can live my sexuality better than Turkey… because this is hidden in Turkey. I have to admit that, I have to confess that, I have not met any Turkish gay person in Turkey before. There are homosexual people in Turkey and they moved to the UK. Because we should not display who we are, what is our sexuality in Turkey.

(Aydin)

He added that he met Turkish gay men in the United Kingdom and held this as a big advantage for him of living abroad.

Further, almost all Kurdish students explained how discrimination and threats towards their people due to political turbulence encouraged them to become mobile, with some regarding their ethnic identity as a major reason for not returning, for example:

I have no future [in Turkey]*, as a Kurd…, so I always aimed to go abroad*.

(Kivanc)

Potential discrimination in their career progression in Turkey was cited as a key adverse reason for ethnicity-related insecurity. However, two distinct perspectives on ethnic identity emerge from the narratives. Those with left-leaning and secular political views expressed concerns over freedoms, human rights and discrimination, for example:

You are leftist, and on top you are Kurdish… This is a double negative. I mean, you are going to suffer more, honestly.

(Baran)

In contrast, other participants considered that being a conservative Turkish Muslim was riskier than being a secular Kurd since the failed military coup in 2016, when some Islamist groups (Gulenist Movement) came under threat, reflecting a secular–conservative divide.

Kurdish respondents looked for destinations where they would not face ethnic discrimination and/or threats, illustrating the link between Kurdish ethnicity and capability (freedom):

I cannot say I come from Kurdistan, the historical Kurdish land in the east part of Turkey when I am in Turkey. I would be jailed for it.

(Kivanc)

Particularly regarding the Kurdish people… It's unbearable right now to live in Turkey. You do not have any space through which your voice can be heard. You are totally isolated.

(Baran)

From the perspective of the capability approach, this can be interpreted as a paucity of the capability of safety if Kurdish students return to Turkey, safety being one type of freedom associated with improving individuals' 'well-being' (functioning).

Overall, the aggressive targeting of women and Kurdish individuals through government policies has led to greater gender and ethnicity inequality. The majority of female and Kurdish respondents looked for countries where they would not face discrimination and/or threats, somewhere they could enhance their capabilities (freedoms).

Restrictive socio-cultural norms and policies and lifestyle choice capability

Lifestyle, yeah it is the freedom that I value most, which I do not think that we have in Turkey.

(Funda)

Most participants stated that socio-cultural norms and policies do not allow them to live their life as they wish, often referring to 'lack of lifestyle freedoms' and related to increasing intolerance in Turkey, which has led to polarisation and division in society, and societal pressure due to the political environment. As expressed by one student:

Erdogan recently said that music, novels and poems are pushing young people into smoking and drinking alcohol, so we should not read and listen to music, can you imagine that? Or a few months ago they were trying to establish a new law that woman can be made to marry a guy who has raped her, or they were also saying that, if a woman is pregnant, she should not go out because it's shameful.

(Asli)

Wishing to obtain a preferred lifestyle was repeatedly brought up by participants, regardless of gender. However, both female and male students stated that the pressure on women and homosexuals is particularly onerous.

Our findings reveal that restrictive social norms and government policies limit lifestyle choice capability fulfilment. Lack of being able to achieve a desired and valued life means failing to exercise well-being (functioning) and thus these students prefer to move somewhere where they can have lifestyle freedom.

DISCUSSION

If you Google in Turkish, I recently did, with a word like Turkey or from Turkey, you will see… the most searched suggestions… they propose is how can I leave Turkey? … the ways for leaving Turkey? … the ways of escaping from Turkey? And so on and so on. So, I can say that like every citizen in Turkey wants to leave Turkey.

(Tolga)

Our findings support the student's statement above as the career plans of the majority of participants (31 out of 40 students) were based on being outside of Turkey, as summed up in the following:

Basically, it's not necessary to live in another country, if your country is somehow providing the basic security and freedom.

(Tolga)

Political factors thus emerge as salient and having a direct impact on many aspects of individuals' lives, including their employability prospects and lifestyle freedoms, resulting in increasing division and polarisation in society and thus limiting diversity and tolerance and, hence, lifestyle freedoms. Moreover, the current Turkish government's politically discriminative practices towards ethnicity, gender and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) are creating insecurity amongst women, Kurdish and LGBT individuals by restricting their freedoms.

A novel capability list for mobility has been established from the findings (Figure 2), showing how political factors impinge on individuals' capabilities and shape their mobility. Specifically, the impact of political factors at macro level (structure) reflects the capability of students at micro level (agency) in terms of: (1) *employment (occupational) capability*, pertaining to how political discrimination affects individual job opportunities; (2) *academic capability*, referring to the link between political and academic freedoms, together with academic productivity; (3) *lifestyle choice capability*, referring to the effect of political policies and socio-cultural norms on the freedom of individual lifestyle choices; (4) *capability of being an active citizen*, relating to the association between host-country migration policies and acquiring permanent residency, which allows individuals to participate in a country's economic and political life; (5) *capability of expression of identity*, referring to government policies towards minorities (ethnicity), women (gender) and LGBT, allowing/not allowing them to demonstrate their identity, thereby creating insecurity amongst these groups.

Accordingly, in this study, student mobility in the contexts of Turkey and the United Kingdom is related to whether or not a certain country provides an environment for capabilities (freedoms) to flourish. Freedom is a core concept in both structuration theory and the capability approach, where freedoms and capabilities are not two separate aspects. Under structuration theory, capability corresponds to power (capacity), whereby having agency means having power. When an agent loses power (the ability to influence society), then he/she looks to countries where it can be acquired. In this research, in most cases, neither the home nor the host country was where participants considered they could exploit their capabilities (freedoms); they were looking for opportunities in third countries owing to the lack of freedom in many aspects of life in the former and strict migration policies in the latter.

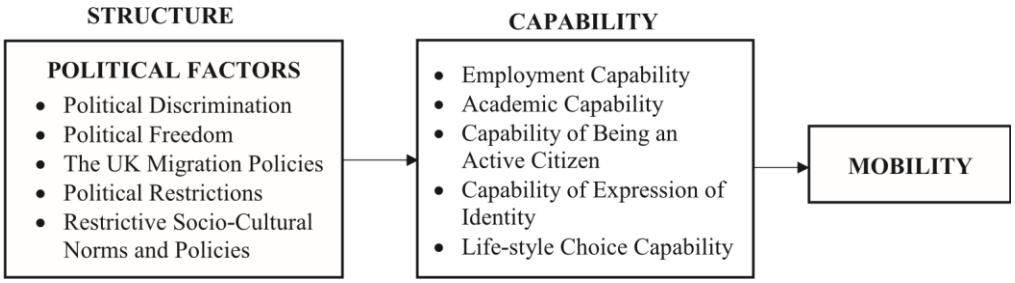

FIGURE 2 Extended framework: Political factors influencing student mobility.

Students interviewed identifying as female, Kurdish, gay or a combination of these identities (approximately 30 out of 40 students) reveal how their mobility is the only way to be free to live as they wish, given current government and social restrictions. Rather than being a choice (option), becoming mobile is an imposition owing to the restrictions on freedoms in the home country. Going beyond the arguments on the distinction between migration and mobility, we propose a novel term 'impo-mobility', which comes from the word impose—to force (an unwelcome decision or ruling) on someone. The term 'impo-mobility' best describes this kind of mobility, which becomes the only option to obtain a safe life.

Since this research was carried out, major changes have taken place, including Covid-19 and new policy implementations, affecting the mobility of international students. Cresswell (2006, p. 21) suggests that mobility is 'the lifeblood of modernity and the virus that threatens to hasten its downfall'. This author was using the word 'virus' as a metaphor in 2006 but, by the beginning of 2020 with Covid-19 on the rampage, it had become a reality. The pandemic has profound and enduring implications for future human mobility (Gamlen, 2020), including of international students. Indeed, there has been ongoing discussion as to whether the pandemic will lead to the end of the internationalisation of higher education (Leask & Green, 2020), whether virtual mobility will replace physical mobility and whether mobility could be strengthened by a hybrid form (physical and virtual) in future. Our research, specifically focused on PhD students from Turkey in the United Kingdom, indicates that location remains important in this case where political factors play such an important role in determining the physical mobility of international students, with individuals suffering from political instability, political discrimination, insufficiency of governance, political persecution and corruption.

Added to the pandemic crisis, changes in national policy are anticipated to impact on the mobility status of international students in future (OECD, 2021). For instance, on 1 January 2021 the United Kingdom launched a points-based immigration system, including a graduate visa that gives international students permission to stay for at least two years after successfully completing a course (Migration Observatory, 2021). Our research findings elicited that the United Kingdom was not a country where international students from Turkey considered they could exploit their capabilities (freedoms/power), owing to the strict migration policies towards highly educated individuals and international students. The points-based system, however, represents a relaxation in these policies that is likely to impact on international student mobility to the United Kingdom.

Future research might address how the weights of the factors influencing mobility change according to different countries and different individuals, and how this impacts on the students' capabilities to become mobile. Further, many countries have put enormous effort into attracting international students, such as Turkey and China, where there are restrictive government policies. A number of international students are studying in China due to the affordability of higher education and attractive government-supported scholarship programmes (Wen & Hu, 2019), whilst a growing number of students from the Middle East, Central Asia and the Balkans can be found in Turkey, which can be attributable to common religious practices and socio-cultural similarities (Aydin, 2021). Future studies might, therefore, probe international student flows to those countries where political restrictions are in place.

CONCLUSION

Our research on the influence of political factors on international student mobility found robust evidence that mobility is determined by politics and government policies relating to employment opportunities, academic

freedom, the institutional autonomy of universities, lifestyle freedoms and migration policies. International students experiencing limited freedom due to restrictive home-country government policies are unable to enhance their capabilities (freedoms) and/or lose the power to influence a particular society, as revealed in the case of students from Turkey in the United Kingdom. In essence, mobility occurs when students' capabilities (freedoms) fail to flourish and they lose their power (capacity) to influence society due to the political environment in the home country. For many participants, neither Turkey nor the United Kingdom was the country where they felt they could fully exploit their capabilities (freedoms/power), thereby achieving well-being, in the former case owing to the lack of freedom in many aspects of life and in the latter because of strict migration policies. Hence, they were looking for opportunities in third countries.

The study provides a novel theoretical framework by applying both structuration theory and the capability approach, thus extending studies applying the former (Healey, 2006) and the latter (Cenci, 2015; Schevel, 2015) to the investigation of highly educated international student mobility. Moreover, establishing a capability list for mobility (Figure 2) goes beyond the work of de Haas (2014), who applied the capability approach to low-educated mobility. The framework proposed provides a starting point for understanding the mobility of other highly educated groups, as well as low-educated mobility cohorts. Further, the term 'mobility' or 'migration' is insufficient to explain student mobility, as evident in the cases of students from Turkey in the United Kingdom. Hence, 'impo-mobility' is proposed to refer to highly educated people having to become mobile as a result of impositions placed upon them by home and host governments' political practices.

Countries like Turkey will not stop losing highly educated individuals unless they make the academic environment more appealing by expanding freedoms in every aspect of life through greater democracy. It appears that the hostile environment created by Brexit, as well as the strict UK migration policies towards both high and low-educated individuals, also render the United Kingdom less appealing as a place to seek residency. To maintain its role as a global player in international higher education after Brexit and to continue to produce the required numbers of highly educated individuals in the workplace, a reconsideration of institutional and national migration policies is necessary.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.781921

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

The study was carried out in alignment with the University of Westminster's research ethics and code of practice as stated in the university's Research Ethics Process.

ORCID

Setenay Dilek Fidler https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7811-7047
Linda Clarke https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4491-5272

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