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Going beyond the 'typical' student? Voicing diversity of experience through biographical encounters with migrant students in Portugal

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Abstract

Research on international student migration has been burgeoning, leading to a more nuanced understanding of international students whose experiences were, for many years, conceptualised in a rather limited way. In this paper, we aim to advance understanding of the diversity and complexity of student migrants' experiences, by proposing a new interpretive framework, developed through narrative enquiry. Based on an in-depth narrative analysis of 41 "biographical encounters" with student migrants in Portugal, we illustrate the potential of biographical approaches in highlighting students' subjectivities, and the complex interplay of diverse factors that shape migration processes. A migration "profile" was assigned to each narrative, capable of representing its leitmotif. This biographical approach to student migration provides a more nuanced understanding of how student migration emerges in time, thus offering a methodological approach that does justice to the diversity of student migration trajectories and may enhance the empirical examination of their experiences.

Keywords: International student migration, Biographical approaches, Migrant experience, Diversity, Narratives

Introduction

International students have become a popular "subject" of research across different academic disciplines, including Economics, Educational Sciences, Human Geography, Political Sciences, Psychology, and Sociology (Gümüş et al., 2020; Lipura & Collins, 2020). The burgeoning multi-disciplinary literature on international student migration/mobility (ISM) has revealed the complexity and variety of students' lived experiences and has moved beyond approaches that tended to reduce "the international student" to a single entity/category (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013).

Likewise, emerging research indicates that ISM cannot be satisfactorily explained through the simple causality of neoliberal macro-economic "push–pull" mechanisms (i.e., from the "developing" to the "developed" world) but requires more refined theoretical and empirical approaches which account for the complex spatialities, temporalities, mobilities, and structures of feeling that underpin these cross-border movements. Seen against the wider diagnosis of a late-modern "hyper-mobility" context (Cohen &

Gössling, 2015), recent advances in the interdisciplinary fields of mobilities and migration studies (Gümüş et al., 2020) provide a useful lens through which to uncover some of the complexities that shape the abstract and heuristic figure of the "international student" and to sketch out their often non-linear journeys.

Despite such theoretical advances, understandings of international students in academic, policy and institutional practice remain rather limited (Carroll and Ryan 2007; Deuchar, 2022; Tran & Vu, 2018). Often seen through a deficit lens, as students and migrants who face multiple difficulties that would be unique to international students (Bodis, 2021; Surtees, 2019; Tran & Vu, 2018), migrant students are often perceived as a burden to their host countries and institutions (Nada & Araújo, 2019). Nevertheless, recently an increasing number of scholars critique such 'deficit narratives' (e.g. Deuchar, 2022; Marginson, 2014; Tran & Vu, 2018), pointing out, for example, the shortcomings of higher education institutions and the role of power dynamics in shaping international students' experiences (Deuchar, 2022). Moreover, despite the growing attention of scholars towards this group of migrants, "the international student experience" remains under-theorised (Deuchar, 2022; Schartner & Young, 2016). When it comes to the complexity of their migration processes, this is often reduced to an education-migration nexus (Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014), where migrant students' core motivations are seen from the perspective of host countries, mainly linked to the acquisition of a higher education degree or the (hidden) objective of eventually becoming a skilled migrant worker. The interplay with other (personal) motivations and rationales is mostly overlooked, leading to a relatively restricted conceptual focus, highlighting snapshots of international students in time rather than considering their experiences over time, or merely recording their linear rites of passage in terms of motivations ahead of, transition into, and exit from their international sojourn (Ploner, 2017; Deuchar, 2022).

In this paper, we intend to contribute to this emerging conceptual and empirical literature, by probing deeper into the complexity and diversity of international student migration. We particularly focus on how international students' migration trajectories unfold over time.

We start from the perspective of migration studies by considering international students as migrants, because they experience "migration-related dynamics: the decision to leave, transit, arrival and settlement, adjustment to a new socio-cultural environment and the development of new social relationships" (Van Mol, 2014, 34–35). From this perspective, conceptual approaches from the field of migration studies can be applied to the specific case of ISM and also determine our use of the term *student migrant/s* instead of the more commonly used term *international student/s*.

Our empirical study is based on narrative encounters with a diverse group of degree-seeking student-migrants in Portugal, which has seen a noticeable increase in recent years (Nada & Araújo, 2019): Our paper provides insights into the migration trajectories of this diverse group of international students in the Portuguese context.

A biographical approach to student migration

When considering international migration trajectories, it is crucial to take into account how individual experiences of migrants are shaped by micro and macro dynamics. On the macro-level, for example, social, economic, and political dynamics can trigger

migration and influence migrants' experiences in the host society. On the micro-level, migrants' experiences are shaped by what Evans (2007) calls "bounded agency", that is, their limited capacity to act within certain environmental factors. Despite growing attention towards a more nuanced interplay between structure and agency (see e.g., Carling & Schewel, 2018) much research still considers migration processes in mechanistic cause-and-effect terms or "push-and-pull" factors (Garelli & Tazzioli, 2021), assuming rational economic decision making of individuals to be the decisive "driver" (Papastergiadis, 2000). According to van der Velde and van Naerssen (2011, 219), this model is anchored in the Western "neoclassical economic tradition based on decision making individuals that act as the ideal homo economicus". Within the literature on international student migration, such mechanistic push–pull approaches have been frequently applied (for a recent critique, see Lipura & Collins, 2020). However, with the surge of a more diversified body of literature on international student migration, empirical findings suggest the need to go beyond rational and universally applicable "choice" approaches. For example, researchers have highlighted the role of transnational social and family networks (De Winter et al., 2021); historical colonial links between individuals, countries, or institutions (Augusto et al., 2022; Ploner & Nada, 2020), or simply spontaneity and curiosity based on lifestyle and touristic motives (Brown & Graham, 2009). At the same time, recent scholarship has made valuable theoretical contributions as to how student migration ties in, and intersects, with other forms of migration, mobility, displacement, and diaspora (Hawthorne, 2005; Krannich & Hunger, 2022; Liu-Farrer, 2009; Wilken & Dahlberg, 2017). Raghuram (2013) convincingly argues that, alongside the global neoliberal race for skilled labour and human capital, education becomes an integral activity for *all* migrants, and for labour and family migrants in particular. Likewise, and amplified by increased marketisation of higher education, many mobile students adopt multiple subjectivities as skill-seekers and labour migrants as they are forced into the labour market to afford tuition, accommodation and living costs, or seek more permanent employment opportunities in the "host" country. In turn, statisticians and policy advisors in popular receiving countries come to realise that international student journeys are "complex" and likely to change over short periods of time. In fact, the UK Deputy National Statistician for Population and Public Policy (2017) proposed that breakdowns of student net migration "by reason" should no longer be published "…as these do not reflect the complexities of people's lives".

All this suggests that, if not abandoned altogether, migration motivations should be addressed in the broader context of international students' life trajectories since they cannot be explained only by economic reasons or by a list of causative factors. This echoes Carlson's view (2013) that conventional theoretical approaches to migration remain "somewhat unsatisfying", especially since the stories that people tell do not always adjust existing theoretical labels (Trahar, 2014). Guided by Carlson's (2011; 2013) proposal, we intend to address this gap by reformulating the main research question from "*why* students migrate" to "*how* students migrate".

In order to understand student migration trajectories, it is important not to separate their experience abroad from their wider life course (Findlay et al., 2012). Such a biographical approach allows framing and analysing students' decisions to move and experiences abroad within specific time periods, contexts and social relations (Elder,

Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003). Or, in other words, it allows considering the dynamic interplay between structure and agency in individual migration decisions and experiences. Following Carlson's (2011) advice, it is useful to reject the common (and arguably neoliberal) idea of "choice" and avoid creating relationships between a set of pre-established variables assigned to student migration. According to Papastergiadis (2000, 17), "by continuing to explain migration purely in terms of cause and consequence of other forces, the social scientists have remained dependent on an outdated mechanistic universe", ignoring migrants' biographies or the influence that they can exert, through their "bounded agency" (Evans, 2007), on factors that may initially appear to be beyond their control.

Thus, the analysis of student migration trajectories in this study is grounded in students' narratives and oral histories, taking into consideration the chronological aspects embedded in their stories and the way migration is being (re)configured over time and well beyond their educational paths. This also goes beyond conceptualising migrant students within the popular, yet reductionist (international) "student life cycle" model which neatly frames their educational experiences between their registration at, and graduation from, university. If the analysis of their migration is confined only to their student status, their multiple, hybrid, and changing identities are likely to be ignored (Raghuram, 2013). On the other hand, the analysis cannot be reduced to their migrant status either because, according to Cwerner (2001, 18), migrants "are also ordinary people whose experience in many respects does not differ from that of 'native' residents". Therefore, the analytical approach proposed in this paper regards migrant students not only as migrants or students but as unique individuals whose "explosive subjectivity" (Ferrarotti, 2003) needs to be allowed space in order to understand migration in its complexity.

Methodology

Our data originates from a study focused on higher education internationalisation. In this study, several "biographical encounters" were organised with student migrants in Portugal. Following a narrative enquiry, rather than plainly *collecting* the data, we attempted to stimulate participants' reflexivity to *construct* data through interaction with the researcher. The recruitment of research participants was conducted with the intention of encompassing the considerable diversity that exists among migrant students in Portugal. To account for this diversity, participants were selected using the maximum variation technique (Patton, 2002). According to Moore-Cox (2013, 95), this purposive sampling approach "is implemented when researchers want to understand how a phenomenon is seen and understood among different people, from different backgrounds, in different settings, with different expertise, and at different times". To encompass the diversity of student migrants, nine criteria for participant selection were established, namely (1) nationality (all participants had different nationalities); (2) geographic and ethnic diversity (different continents of origin); (3) linguistic diversity (Portuguese native speakers or not); (4) different host universities; (5) different faculties; (6) different study cycles (BA, MA, PhD); (7) gender; and (8) time of residence (minimum one year).

These combined (and intersectional) criteria led to a diverse participant set, in line with our objectives of understanding student migrant trajectories in their complexity.

Consequently, different characteristics were taken into account in the analysis, for instance, migrants' national background, their linguistic and cultural heritage, age and subsequent care obligations.

After identifying participants, migration narratives were constructed based on several interviewing sessions in the form of lightly structured in-depth interviews (Wengraf, 2001). However, for reasons of methodological consistency, and to circumvent potential researcher-researched power dynamics, we do not refer to these sessions as interviews but as "biographical encounters". Such encounters are radically different from interviews in the sense that researchers do not continuously rely on questions to construct a story but allow participants' life stories to emerge of their own accord (Yuen, 2008). After starting with a "generative" narrative question (Riemann & Schütze, 1987) to elicit and provoke storytelling, researchers' "interventions remain very restricted" (Wengraf, 2001, 11).

Rather than producing an interview schedule, we developed a narrative sequence guide (see Fig. 1) to warrant a trustworthy narrative of students' migratory experience beyond their actual stay abroad as well as to remind the researcher of different elements that may come into play in such stories. Acknowledging that (biographical) storytelling may not always be linear or follow a strict chronological order (Horsdal, 2012), participants were free to recount their experiences as it suited them and at their own pace.

Once research participants concluded their storytelling – which in some cases happened only in the second biographical encounter – the recordings of the first session(s) were transcribed. Rather than simply sharing the resulting text with the participants and booking a following biographical encounter to discuss it, the researcher met every participant again and read, paragraph by paragraph, the text that had resulted from the initial storytelling. This strategy was rooted in the assumption that "if story-givers are to make sense of and provide coherence to their lives, they must have sufficient opportunity to read, reflect upon, and find meaning in their stories" (Larson, 1997, 467). After listening to each paragraph, participants were invited to comment on its content, complement it, or correct potential inaccuracies. The apparently simple act of listening to

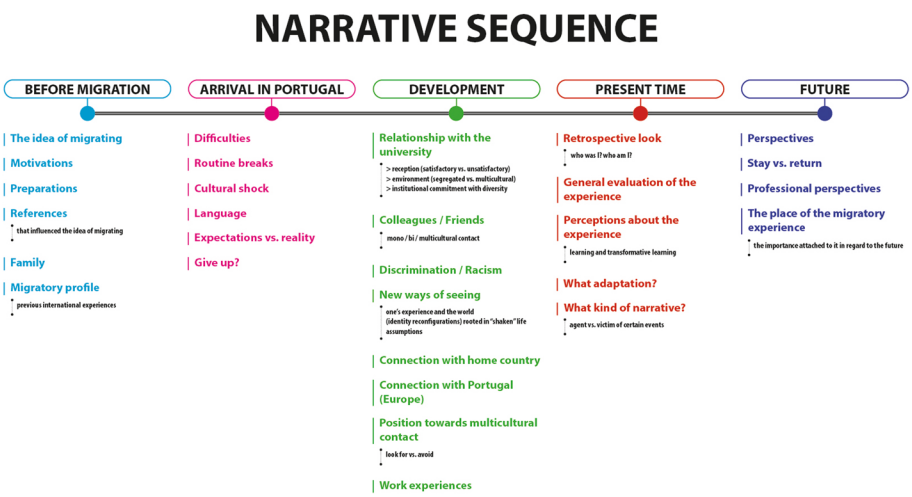

Fig. 1 Narrative sequence guide considered during the biographical encounters

their own lives and migration stories, through the researcher's voice, prompted participants to rethink and share experiences that they did not mention before. Albeit time-consuming, this strategy proved to be empirically productive in that almost all students added significant information to their initial stories, generating extra data. In total, 41 biographical encounters were conducted – with an average duration of two hours each (approx. 78 h of recorded material).

The development of our analytical strategy was done in line with the specificity of the migration process. For instance, the fact that migration unfolds not only in space but also in time (Cwerner, 2001), reinforced Riessman's (1993) recommendation to avoid fracturing the narratives during the interpretive process. At the same time, considering that one's personal background might condition the overall experience (Hazen & Alberts, 2006), and that migration is experienced in different ways by different people, participants' previous experiences should not be detached from their biographies, nor disregarded in the interpretive process. Attending to these theoretical and methodological considerations, a processual lens for the analysis of migration was adopted (Carlson 2013), seeking to understand not only *why* the research participants migrated but *how* their migrations emerged and developed over time.

In conclusion, in our analytical/interpretive endeavour narratives were considered individually, in their singularity, and focusing on the whole text, rather than dividing it into themes/categories and interpreting those across narratives. During this interpretive process, we observed that a migration *leitmotif* emerged from each narrative and that participants' accounts were assuming the form of "a vocabulary of motive" (Plummer, 2001). Based on this, a "migratory profile" was ascribed to each participant, in line with the plot of his/her narrative and the different migration rationales reflected therein.

Migration profiles and their diversity

This analysis led to the construction of twelve complex migration narratives. Each narrative represents a unique migration profile and illustrates how migration occurs at the intersection of multiple structural, individual, and biographical factors. Whilst this heuristic labelling is based on the interpretivist genesis of this study and limited to the authors' familiarity with existing categorisations in both international migration and student mobility research, it seeks to offer a more refined level of abstraction that challenges temporarily and contextually punctual student/migrant profiles and, thus, may assist future researchers in their analytical endeavours. At the same time, and following our theoretical prepositions outlined above, we think that ascribing adjectives to each profile provides a more trustworthy representation of 'how' migration occurs in each case, rather than rehearsing established categorisations which tend to generalise 'why' migration happens (i.e. 'labour migration', 'lifestyle migration', 'degree mobility', etc.)

It is important to highlight that all 12 narratives were connected with a migration profile. However, due to space restrictions, only six profiles are presented here. The six profiles to be presented in detail were selected purposefully, in line with our maximum variation technique, as to achieve diversity in terms of national and class identity, educational biography, and post-colonial subjectivities. The six narratives described below hence present migratory profiles that simultaneously complement and contrast each

other, contributing to our understanding of the heterogeneity of international student migration.

The "pre-determined" migrant

The first migratory profile we present is that of Rita, who is in her twenties and from São Tomé, and whom we labelled a *pre-determined* migrant. Her narrative suggests that the idea of migration can develop early in one's life-course as a result of an existing migration culture (i.e., historical and [post]colonial migration between "home" and "host" country; shared language). Due to the limited development of the higher education sector in her "home" country, Rita notes that study abroad is popular among young people in São Tomé.

> *In São Tomé, it is already a habit to go abroad when we finish high school. Students leave for university abroad because we have few faculties there and not with that quality of education. [...] To me, studying abroad has always been something that was already stipulated, to everybody. (Rita)*

In this context, Rita's migration did neither emerge as a choice nor as a burden, but as something that she always expected to happen.

Another relevant aspect of Rita's narrative is the fact that, because of colonial links, Portugal was not a completely unknown country to her:

Through her experience in a private Portuguese secondary school, Rita had access to the Portuguese educational culture beforehand, which seems to have eased her academic adaptation in Portugal.

> *So we always go abroad in order to study and, when you leave São Tomé and come here for university, it is [a] completely different [experience]. […] Since I attended a Portuguese school, I don't notice that [difference as] much as the other students do […] when they come here. (Rita)*

The fact that Rita studied in a private school underlines another determinant factor of her migration: social class. In spite of the scholarships provided by the state, the possibility of studying abroad is not accessible to all students from São Tomé, especially if their families do not have the means to support them during their international sojourns. Indeed, "existing scholarship on ISM shows clear linkages between student mobility and social class" (Pásztor, 2015: 833).

> *For the ones who do not have the means, it's complicated to leave because the aid provided by the State could help a little bit, but is rather annoying because the State sometimes fails [the payment] and, when it does, parents need to have the means to intervene. If they don't, their children [will] experience very difficult situations. (Rita)*

Also worth highlighting is the close link between migration and studies. Together with the impression that, in São Tomé, *basically everybody studies abroad*, this student's propensity for migration was enhanced by a certain level of mobility capital inherited from her parents, both of whom had studied abroad and, as a potential consequence, pursue high-status professions. This raises the issue of mobility capital and social class as

key determinants of student migration (Pendergrass, 2013). Even though mobility capital, originally coined by Murphy-Lejeune (2002), is defined as "a form of human capital that arises from previous experiences of living abroad" (King & Raghuram, 2013, 132), this narrative shows that, like cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), mobility capital can also be reproduced within families whose members have a history of migration and international experiences.

Rita's *pre-determined* migrant profile confirms the necessity to look at migratory trajectories in close connection with the wider biographical context in which migration occurs. Whilst the perceived under-developed status of higher education in her home country can be considered a structural driver of outgoing student migration, the migration plans of Rita have been taking shape throughout her life and in response not only to structural factors at the macro-level as well as to expectations of her social environment at micro-level.

The "unwilling" migrant

A second migratory profile was assigned to Tânia, a student migrant we heuristically labelled the *unwilling* migrant. Tânia is originally from Angola, in her early thirties, and engaged in migration to Portugal twice. She first ended up in Portugal as a child where she stayed for more than one decade and completed a part of her initial formal education, the upper-secondary level, and also her undergraduate degree.

> *I had two [migratory] moments. I came here, very young, and [...] that was a decision that ended up not being mine. At that time, Angola lived a period of civil war, and I ended up losing my father in that war, he was a military. My mother, our relatives, decided that it was better for me to come to Portugal, because education was different, with a lot more quality. Since here there was a boarding school, also military, nothing better than going [to Portugal] with a scholarship from the Ministry of Defence. (Tânia)*

This excerpt reveals a combination of several biographical incidents and structural conditions that led to migration. Besides the tragic loss of the paternal figure, the availability of scholarships and the perceived higher quality of education abroad played an important role. In this sense, Tânia's migration to Portugal shares some similarities with the previous case, given that structural and historical factors linked to the (post)colonial links between the "home" and "host" countries were key elements in this migration process. The link between migration and education is also crucial in this narrative, considering that her family's main rationale for deciding on Tânia's migration was the prospect of a better education. Unlike the previous case, however, Tânia's migration was not initially envisioned, nor emerged as a result of her own decision. In fact, back in her childhood, Tânia did not want to move to a foreign country and be away from her family, hence the *unwilling* character of migration.

The second "migration moment" emerged later, when Tânia was working for the Angolan Ministry of Defence and the opportunity to do a Master's degree in Portugal arose in that professional setting:

> *I was unhappy [with the work proposal] because I already had my things there [in Angola], [I had] my family, I didn't want [to leave] anymore, I had spent too much*

time far away from my family. […] When they told me about the Master's, [that I would need to do it in Portugal], I did not want to come anymore, but I was forced to embrace the project. (Tânia)

The forced character of the proposal to pursue a Master's degree in Portugal as part of her professional role is relative. In fact, rather than being 'forced', Tânia received a proposal that, in terms of current and future professional benefits, seemed wiser to accept. Nevertheless, neither the first time she came to Portugal, nor the second, did Tânia do so according to her own will. In fact, migration was imposed on her twice: the first as a decision of her family, to which she did not have the means to resist, given her tender age; the second due to a work proposal to study in Portugal that she was not interested in, yet she perceived as fundamental to her career development. The reason for which Tânia embodies the migratory profile of the *unwilling* migrant resides precisely in the fact that both her migrations to Portugal occurred against her own will. Her experience echoes Carlson's (2013, 168) argument that student migration should not be perceived "as the result of a one-time choice but as the outcome of different long-term biographical and social processes and events".

The "gradual" migrant

We identified a third migratory profile that shows the complexity of migratory processes and trajectories. Corina, who can be labelled as a *gradual* migrant, is in her late thirties, from Moldova. After studying in Romania, she returned to her home country where she intended to settle and work as a Romanian language teacher. Her husband, who had previously migrated to Portugal, asked her to join him for a visit. Even though she was expecting to keep her sojourns in Portugal limited to short visits, Corina ended up engaging in longer stays, which eventually became permanent. Corina's initial reason for going to Portugal was related to the fact that her husband was already living in this country and could hardly travel internationally due to his irregular migratory status.

After [my studies in Romania] I returned to Moldova, [and] I had already started to work as a teacher when my husband thought about this idea of me going to Portugal. He was not able to come, because of the legalisation, only after one year and a half they would start to legalise the immigrants, so he needed to be here, not to lose that opportunity. (Corina)

After a short period in Portugal, Corina returned to Moldova, where she was waiting for her husband to return, without even considering the possibility of migrating. Since her husband decided to extend his stay in Portugal, Corina's plans changed, and she returned to Portugal:

[So] I arrived in Portugal, I stayed for one year and then I returned to Moldova thinking that I would never go back. I had my son [in Moldova] and I was waiting for us to settle there. [Life] was already starting to get better for me but, after that, my husband considered that we [my son and I] should return to Portugal. (Corina)

Even when she returned to Portugal for the second time, Corina did not have plans to engage in a long-term migration. Instead, much of her experience echoes what De Haas and Fokkema (2010) have described as return or pendulum migration, that is, the

swinging movements between perceived "home" and "destination" country, frequently determined by complex intra-household (power) relations and decision making. However, what transformed Corina's second sojourn in Portugal into a permanent migration was her dissatisfaction with her home country and the desire to ensure an uninterrupted educational trajectory for her son.

> *Our son was two years old [when I returned to Portugal], so when he would reach the age of enrolling in school, we would return to Moldova. But that [ended up being] different. When I went to Moldova for holidays, I was finding things to be worse there, I would convince myself that I should stay here, that [in Moldova] there were no chances for me [to succeed]. (Corina)*

In this case, the idea of migration emerged gradually and, to some extent, took by surprise its own protagonist.

Regarding her education, even though she lived in Portugal for several years, Corina enrolled in a Master's degree many years after her arrival. Previously, she experienced downward social mobility as a direct result of migration (Cederberg, 2017), when she worked as a housekeeper. However, the reason for engaging in low-qualified work, despite her tertiary education degree, was also rooted in her intentions to stay in Portugal only temporarily. In this context, one of the reasons for delaying her re-entry in higher education was based precisely on the uncertainty caused by her *gradual* migration trajectory.

> *I worked [as a housekeeper] for two years in the house of [a lady] with whom I got along very well and she used to tell me: "You can study, you can do something else"; but, at that time, I did not know yet that I would end up staying here, in Portugal. (Corina)*

Furthermore, this excerpt raises the question of a different type of migration process which tends to go largely unnoticed in the research literature. Frequently, researchers regard migrant students as potential permanent immigrants, who "adjust their status from visitors to immigrants once they have completed their degrees" (Hazen & Alberts, 2006, 202). In such cases, the migratory process is conceived based on a student-to-migrant trajectory (Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014). Interestingly, Corina's narrative illustrates an inversed experience where her decision to enrol in a Master's degree came many years after arriving in the host country (migrant-to-student), and was prompted, at least to some extent, through friendly advice by her employer. Both during her first and second sojourn in Portugal, Corina had always pictured a life in Moldova before eventually settling in Portugal. Predominantly based on family interests, dependencies and power relations, Corina's and Tânia's migration stories bear similarities, however, their trajectories of *gradual* and *unwilling* migrants unfold in different ways.

The "incidental" migrant

The fourth migratory profile we consider relevant for the current discussion is what we call the *incidental* migrant, represented by Brenda's narrative. Brenda, who is in her twenties and originally from the US, has already had several international experiences, and moved to Portugal *for no specific reason*. Prior to that, Brenda worked at an

international office at a university in Germany, providing support to international students. Even though that was her area of professional interest, Brenda became disillusioned with her job due to the lack of opportunities for further career advancement, which contributed to her wish to leave Germany. Besides reasons linked to career progression, leaving Germany was also triggered by a certain "wanderlust" or "travel bug" (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002), which Brenda regards as natural and somehow inevitable:

> *I really did want to work in study abroad and I do like Germany even though sometimes I get annoyed with it and sick of it… you get annoyed and sick of anywhere really. If someone stays somewhere long enough, then it happens […] that was my feeling about Germany at that point. (Brenda)*

Even though the desire to leave Germany existed, when she decided to travel to Portugal, Brenda did not carefully weigh all her possibilities and, instead, acted like a "backpacker". According to O'Reilly (2006), backpackers embrace serendipity rather than detailed planning and are open to the possibility of changing plans and itineraries. After meeting a Portuguese man online, Brenda decided to visit him and found out that she enjoyed Portugal very much.

> *I was on an online dating site, and I started talking to a Portuguese guy and eventually ended up going to visit him […]. I went back to visit a few times and I really fell in love with Portugal. After almost two years [in Germany] I decided to move on with my life and do something, but I didn't know exactly what to do so I decided to go to Portugal. Not really for a good reason. With the guy [whom I met online], our connection was kind of ending so I wasn't moving here for him. (Brenda)*

Consequently, the reasons that led Brenda to migrate to Portugal are neither educationally motivated, nor fully professional. Triggered by an unexpected amorous encounter, a latent feeling of "moving on" and "falling in love" with Portugal, Brenda's migration developed rather spontaneously and serendipitously. Unlike the previous profiles we sketched out, her experience comes close to what Benson and O'reilly (2016) term lifestyle migration – increasing nomadic forms of international movement and "wandering" that blur the boundaries between travel, migration and leisure. Moreover, Brenda's story confirms the pertinence of Carlson's (2013, 169) proposal according to which "the question of *why* students go abroad needs to be turned into *how* do they become geographically mobile". Certainly, dominant theoretical models that seek to understand the rationale behind *why* students go abroad do not align with accounts in which migration happens *for no good reason*.

Eventually, Brenda decided to apply for a residence permit in Portugal and, while awaiting the decision, she travelled internationally for a whole year. In addition, she decided on a six-week "trial run" living in Portugal *…just to try it out and make sure that I didn't already get sick of it*. These episodes highlight Brenda's easiness to travel and the influence of social and mobility capital in the development of her migration trajectory. In this respect, and being aware of the heuristic nature of the labels we apply in this analysis, there are overlaps between Brenda's *incidental* migration trajectory and the previous narratives (namely Rita's) as they are afforded by a considerable amount of mobility capital.

When Brenda's application for a residence permit in Portugal was rejected and her "trial period" was coming to an end, serendipity stroke and reconfigured her migratory path once again.

> *So, I was pretty much planning on leaving in August but then I met Pedro and we had our first date on July 1st. We kept going out on more dates and spending a lot of time together and finally, I said: "Ok, I will find a way to stay here". Because my tourist visa was ending, I still had to leave for a few months and come back later, but I ended up getting a student visa, to go to a Portuguese language course in [the city of] Braga. (Brenda)*

In this context, studying abroad, so far absent from Brenda's migratory trajectory, was instrumentally used as a way to prolong her residency permit in Portugal. In fact, Brenda's reasons for enrolling in a Master's degree are not closely related to an academic purpose:

> *I'm actually not really much of an academic, I don't really enjoy researching. But I just knew that a Master's is an important thing to have, in general, in life, and I figured also that it would help me learn Portuguese [...]. I would meet people. [...] Then I could extend my student visa as well. (Brenda)*

This profile shows how migration "resulted from the interactional dynamics within the respective relationship, rather than from individual decision making" (Carlson 2013, 176). Contrary to those individuals who engage in "transnational marriage migration" (Yeoh et al., 2021) or Corina's *gradual* migration strongly dependent on family ties, Brenda was already living in Portugal when she met her boyfriend and future husband. In this sense, her romantic engagement did not constitute the main trigger for her international move, but it encouraged her to extend her stay in Portugal, using education as a means to achieve that.

Brenda's trajectory reflects the migratory profile of the *incidental* migrant whose migration is marked by serendipity, contradicting the established idea that "international migrants take strategic decisions to move or stay" (van der Velde & van Naerssen, 2011, 223). Rather, migration occurs alongside and in-between subjective life events (e.g. love) and structural conditions (e.g. residence policies). Considering that "migration requires resources" (Waldinger, 2013, 351), Brenda's *incidental* or *lifestyle* migration seems more likely to occur among individuals with higher levels of social and mobility capital and we found similar accounts among other students we interviewed in this research. Whilst in some cases migration emerges without one's awareness (*gradual* migrant) or even against one's will (*unwilling* migrant), other profiles such as the *pre-determined* and the *incidental* migrant have in common a seemingly effortless and fluid approach to mobility, a high level of independence, wanderlust and networking skills, and an overall cosmopolitan outlook, all afforded by substantial financial, social and cultural capital. Compared to other profiles, they exemplify that the phenomenon of (student) migration is far too complex to be understood only in terms of reasons and motivations or cause-and-effect models. Too often overlooked in the ISM literature (King & Raghuram, 2013) these serendipitous factors capable of influencing migration need to be considered.

The "runaway" migrant

Adding up to the narratives presented above is the profile of the *runaway* migrant. Aiko is a female Japanese student in Portugal, in her forties, whose migration emerged as means of "running away" from an unsatisfactory (professional) life.

> *When I came here, I did not think about extending the period of my stay. I was a runaway, I did not think. I was not thinking about going back to Japan, nor about continuing here, I did not even have any expectations. (Aiko)*

Similar to Brenda's narrative, the process of migration described by Aiko was not carefully planned nor intended, but emerged rather suddenly as a consequence of Aiko's frustration with her life in Japan. Aiko's profile further contributes to the deconstruction of the widespread idea of migrants consciously choosing to leave their home countries, usually with a clear objective in mind. In Aiko's case, migration was not based on "a single relocation decision" (King et al., 2006, 259), but occurred in a context of continued professional dissatisfaction and a sense of urgency to change her life.

> *I wanted to run away from my life in Japan because of my job as a [karate] instructor, it was very stressful, I really wanted to run away [from it] and I did. [...] It was an escape, a fugitive decision, I had reached my limit. (Aiko)*

Even though the idea of leaving her country was strongly influenced by professional dissatisfaction, the way in which Aiko chose a destination country for her migration was determined by her first contact with the Portuguese language, which happened during a short trip to Brazil.

> *I was already studying Portuguese at that moment when I decided to leave Japan. I started to study Portuguese in 2008. I went to Brazil in order to participate in a championship and I encountered there a language that I liked a lot. Then, [...] since I didn't have any other [possible] exit for my life, I thought that studying language in Portugal could be an option. (Aiko)*

In this sense, a peculiar fascination for the Portuguese language strongly influenced not only Aiko's migration to Portugal but also her higher education enrolment, as she now studies a BA in European languages and literature.

Similar to Brenda's narrative, after migrating to Portugal, education became an instrument to ensure Aiko's legal right to continue living in Portugal.

> *In May the Portuguese course ended and I continued to do a [Portuguese] Summer course for foreigners so that they would not cut off my visa. (Aiko)*

Given her unpremeditated and rushed migration, Aiko embodies the profile of the *runaway* migrant and she uses this phrase deliberately in describing her migration. According to Benson and O'reilly (2009, 609), similar phrases like "getting out of the trap", "making a fresh start" or "a new beginning" are frequently used among migrants. As observed by one of our participants, migrants usually *run away from something*. While such vocabulary might indicate renunciation or weakness, it can also be a sign of agency and willingness to improve a displeasing state of affairs. As

stated by Trifanescu (2015, 98), "more than running from something, such migration patterns signify running towards something". Another interesting insight from this narrative is again the importance that different biographical events may have in shaping migration processes. Whilst it is clear why Aiko engaged in a sudden migration, the fact that she chose Portugal as a destination country was strongly determined by her first contact with the Portuguese language during a trip to Brazil that occurred many years before her migration to Portugal.

The "fighter" migrant

Another profile that is closely related to that of the *runaway* migrant belongs to Laina, the *fighter* migrant. Similar to Aiko, Laina sought to escape the constraints and drawbacks that she was experiencing in her life in her own country, using migration as a way out of an unbearable situation (Trifanescu, 2015). Laina is a transgender woman from Laos, in her thirties, with a life trajectory strongly marked by struggle and discrimination.

> *Everything that happens in my life actually relates to my gender. […] Due to the culture and tradition [... people in my country] think that this thing [being transgender] is something not acceptable and it's even sinful, so it's kind of difficult for me to be in my own country, my hometown even more. [...] I can say that one of the reasons that I decided to go to study [abroad] it is to be away from my home because I don't feel comfortable there. (Laina)*

The harshness of being transgender in Laos is illustrated by an emotional episode from Laina's past: a suicide attempt.

> *I was drinking a bottle of beer and, when I finished it, I broke the bottle and I cut my hand. As soon as I did the first cut, I thought about my parents and everything came up to my mind telling me: "Don't do it Laina, you can go through this and you have to live for your family, they are waiting for you, you are their expectation, you are their dreams. If you die, they will feel very disappointed and very sad"; and then I stopped, I did only one cut. I was thinking of giving myself multiple cuts but, then, I decided to go to the hospital by myself, nobody knows about this story. (Laina)*

Besides leaving a context in which she did not feel comfortable nor valued, Laina's migration and the willingness to engage in education abroad emerge as a means of social mobility. Given her modest socio-economic background, Laina has always been interested in improving her education and presents migration in its close relationship to educational goals:

> *We were very poor. [...] I remember my father said that education is the key for your life, if you are not educated then you will become miserable, you will not be able to solve your problems. That is the childhood memory that I picked up and I keep that as a life principle forever. (Laina)*

The desire to improve her education appears to have been paramount in the emergence of Laina's migration. In fact, Laina's migration narrative is intrinsically linked to education and even determined by it, especially considering this student's dissatisfaction

with the educational system in her home country. In other words, the perceived lack of quality of education in Laos incited Laina to seek better conditions abroad.

> *I graduated from university in Laos but the quality of education I can say that is very low and I need to learn more and more. […] Regarding the quality of education, I knew, even before I came, that here it was better. (Laina)*

At a first glance, Laina appears to be a "typical student" (Tian & Lowe, 2014), since she seems "pushed" to complete a higher education degree in a Western country, based on perceived differences in quality. In this sense, and apart from her much less privileged socio-economic background, Laina's narrative shows similarities with that of Rita (*predetermined* migrant) since both consider personal educational development based on certain quality standards as the key criterion for moving abroad. However, her narrative accommodates several idiosyncrasies. For instance, Laina's narrative gives an account of a very challenging life-course marked by discrimination and supressed feelings due to her non-normative gender identity. The leitmotif of this migration narrative is the idea of fighting and resisting adversity. Laina's motivations for engaging in migration go far beyond education, being related to her gender identity, and to the way in which she reacts to the feeling of being an outsider in her own country. In this narrative, there are moments "when migration or flight seemed inevitable" (Hölscher, 2016, 55), underlining a potential analogy between Laina and a forced migrant. Even though she is not running from war, Laina is running from a life marked by discrimination, incomprehension, and struggle. Even though narratives of resilience are shared among different research participants, the profile of the *fighter* migrant describes Laina's migration trajectory and captures her will of resisting and surpassing the vicissitudes of being socially marginalised.

Conclusion

Drawing on these narratives, it is possible to observe that migrant students' trajectories present "a myriad of aspirations and experiences" (Ploner, 2017, 428). This diversity of migrant trajectories needs to be considered if research is to bring insights into the lives of the people who are actually located at the core of migration. Too often, institutional and structural factors emerge as key analytical elements (Bakewell, 2010), whilst the very protagonists of migration, with their underlying complex biographical trajectories, are lost from sight.

While acknowledging diversity of experience, we do not suggest that underlying structural or "macro" factors should be rejected both in theoretical and analytical terms. Indeed, some of the "profiles" we have sketched out bear similarities and align with more fundamental historical changes that characterise higher education mobilities in the age of neoliberal globalisation. For instance, these may relate to the pursuit of internationally trusted "quality" standards; the affordances provided by shared language or existing bi-lateral links between "home" and "host" country; post-colonialism and the uneven distribution of capital and labour in the global "North" and "South"; the administrative workings of migration policies and regulations; or the increasingly blurred boundaries between global knowledge and experience economies refracted in hypermobile migratory "lifestyles". The concept of 'bounded agency' (Evans, 2007) becomes particularly relevant here to understand that migrants' agency is often bounded by external factors and

barriers, which prevent them from following certain paths and continuously reconfigure their envisioned trajectories and plans. The profile of the *pre-determined* migrant is particularly relevant here, illustrating how migration can emerge as an apparently individual decision, which is in fact strongly influenced by wider structural and even historical factors.

The migratory profiles presented here also highlight the crucial, and too often overlooked, role of time in migration research (Cwerner, 2001) and the potential of biographical methods in illustrating how migration trajectories unfold throughout the life course and are marked by key elements such as personal aspirations, power relations, structural conditions and even serendipity. Whilst some migration trajectories may be expected and are somehow embedded in people's biographies due to contextual, structural, or historical factors (*pre-determined* migrant), others engage in migration as a direct result of power dynamics (*unwilling* migrant), a diverse combination of haphazard events (*incidental* migrant), structures of feeling and family dynamics (*gradual* migrant), or a strong determination to improve one's education and life conditions (*fighter* migrant).

All presented narratives gave an account of singular, albeit meaningful migration experiences, which were described through an adjective capable of summarising the main plot of each narrative. Besides the six migratory profiles presented in this paper (predetermined, unwilling, gradual, incidental, runaway, and fighter migrant), our study generated another six heuristic profiles that were not possible to explore in the current paper (determined, rebellious, effortless, restless, polymorphous, and trapped migrant). Even though the six narratives showcased in this article belong to female participants (one transgender), the factor of gender was not considered in our analyses.

Due to the idiosyncratic nature of each migration story, and independent of the predominantly female participant set, we did not aim to identify any general patterns that would apply to the entire group of participants. At the same time, despite their uniqueness, the narratives do not only provide meaningful insights into the lives of their authors but add to understanding the complex experiences of other migrant students. Ascribing a profile to each migration narrative embodies our intention to cross the border from the individual realm into the social one. In line with Ferrarotti (2003, 26), we consider that "all behaviour, every individual act, appears in its most individual forms as a horizontal synthesis of a social structure". In this sense, understanding the intentions and actions of these individual migrants allows us to glimpse upon the social structures that may affect the process of migration of other (similar) migrants. In other words, the migratory profiles presented here embody the "heuristic passage which sees the universal through the singular, which seeks the objective by hinging on the subjective, and which discovers the general through the particular" (Ferrarotti, 2003, 30). These migratory profiles can therefore be understood in relation to the Weberian ideal type, a methodological tool against which empirical cases may be analysed (Grønning, 2017). Whilst other migrants will certainly have distinct migratory experiences and rationales, core elements of these migratory profiles can be identified in other cases and hence provide migration scholars a powerful explanatory tool for understanding complex and diverse experiences of migration.

For example, the profile of the *pre-determined* migrant can support the understanding of migration processes that emerge in contexts where the higher education sector is

developing and there is a long-term tradition of studying abroad. This is often the case in former colonies, where many young people go to study abroad and usually do so in the former metropole (Ploner & Nada, 2020). Whilst personal trajectories and motivations may significantly vary, *pre-determined* migration processes are linked to the idea of a culture of migration, where "migration becomes deeply ingrained into the repertoire of people's behaviours" (Massey et al., 1993, 452), to the point that it may lead to such *pre-determined* migration processes.

Similarly, the profile of the *fighter* migrant can be useful in understanding migration processes that emerge as a result of migrants' willingness to leave a challenging context and seek personal, social and economic improvement in another place. Migration narratives linked to resilience and determination can gain meaning in light of the *fighter* migrant profile, which reveals an affluent "set of performances of coping with challenging circumstances" (Ploner, 2017, 438).

These findings and the explanatory power of the migratory profiles depicted here have several implications for the study of international student migration and subsequent ISM policies. First, migratory profiles such as the one of the *gradual* and *incidental* migrants, in which the emergence of migration is not planned, nor intended, call for a wider understanding of international student migration as not necessarily a careful and thought-through plan, but a potentially unstructured and not-always-logical endeavour which takes place over a longer period of time. This calls for research methodologies that are not only longitudinal in scope, but also enhance participants' reflexivity and allow them the necessary time to think about and make sense of their migration experiences.

Second, avoiding reductive understandings of international migrant students as vulnerable and passive subjects that present certain deficits is fundamental. As shown by our data, international migrant students present diverse rationales and trajectories and, despite some structural and contextual vulnerabilities, they are often powerful agents of their own lives.

Third, our findings underline the need of understanding student migrant trajectories beyond their educational cycles and motivations. As shown above, students can become migrants, migrants can become students, and diversity is the name of the game when it comes to student migration. Unlike common understandings of this migrant population, student migrants do not necessarily migrate with an educational purpose. Migration rationales tend to be much more diverse, and the educational dimension can be marginal in some narratives, or initially even non-existing, only to emerge at a later stage in one's trajectory. Moreover, in some profiles such as the *incidental* and the *runaway* migrants, education may not be an end in itself but can be used as a tool for supporting or prolonging migration. It is, therefore, important to consider student migration beyond the perspective of host countries and institutions, but from the standpoint of student migrants themselves—a perspective that has become even more pertinent in times of increased anti-immigration sentiment in many leading higher education 'host' countries (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2020).

Finally, "The" international student experience is clearly not a useful category of analysis, since it does not account for the diversity of trajectories. This aspect is fundamental in the design of more adequate policies and institutional measures for international migrant students, which need to be adapted to the realities of different groups.

The migratory profiles presented here provide an initial picture of these diverse realities, allowing practitioners and policymakers to develop more targeted measures and programmes. Not only migration rationales and motivations are diverse, but so are migrant students' needs. Whilst some migrant students may need support in developing a stronger relationship with the local community, others may require extra support in accessing higher education, while others who are already enrolled in education may require support in navigating different academic environments.

Following this biographical approach, we were able to highlight that migrant students are not a homogenous group like they are frequently depicted in the research literature, which seems to be often in search of the "typical" student (Tian & Lowe, 2014). From our findings, it is clear that there is no such thing as a "typical" migrant student if we choose to dive into research participants' lives and look through methodological lenses that treat diversity as a variable that needs to be enhanced rather than minimised. By acknowledging the need to embrace complexity in student migration research, this paper incites migration scholars to rely on methodological approaches that do justice to the diversity of migratory trajectories and enhance their empirical examination.

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Author contributions
CN conducted the fieldwork, constructed and analysed the narratives. JP supported the first author in the analysis of the narratives and contributed to the theoretical framework of the paper. CvM revised and edited the first draft of the manuscript, adding a few key relevant reflections on its contribution to migration studies. HCA supported the first author throughout the development of the research and especially during the analysis process. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials
The data used in this paper emanate from narrative research conducted with twelve individual migrants. Given the level of detail contained in these narratives, to safeguard research participants' anonymity, the full versions of their narratives are not available online. If necessary, relevant parts of their narratives may be shared with interested parties upon request.

Declarations

Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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