

Mobility Motivations: International Students Navigating Decisions to Pursue Graduate Degrees Abroad

*A Case Study of Foreign Master's Students Coming to Oslo,
Norway in Pandemic Times*

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Abstract

Higher education has become increasingly internationalized in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, with international student mobility (ISM) being a key area of internationalization activities. A better understanding of ISM can be achieved by examining the rationales behind why students seek academic opportunities abroad, particularly those who choose to pursue a full degree in a foreign country. Drawing upon the push-pull concept of migration for international study choice from Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) and the theory of student agency in educational decision-making from Gambetta (1987), this study examines the significance of different types of motivational factors during the process of navigating mobility decisions. Following a qualitative research approach, this case study employed individual interviews with ten current master's students from North America, South America, Africa, and Asia who chose to come to Norway in 2021 to pursue a graduate degree at two Norwegian universities: BI Norwegian Business School (BI) and The University of Oslo (UiO). Within this context, not only were traditional types of motivational factors for ISM considered (educational, economic, and social/political/cultural), but pandemic-related motivations were also added to the study design as a new type of factor influencing mobility decisions for these participants amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The research findings indicated that the student decision-making journey for ISM is complex and nuanced, with different types of motivations rising and falling in significance across various stages of the process. Social/political/cultural motives were most notable in the push to leave the home country and the pull to go abroad, while both economic and social/political/cultural motivations mattered most for the pull towards Norway as a study destination. Additionally, educational and economic motives were most influential in the decision to attend BI or UiO. While making these critical ISM choices, participants also had to navigate a unique new set of pandemic factors in their mobility journeys. The results from this research study provide new insights about mobility motivations to Norway for the country's higher education stakeholders to consider when thinking about ISM strategies in 2023 and beyond.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

BI	BI Norwegian Business School
COVID-19	C oronavirus D isease 2019
Diku	Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education
EU	The European Union
EEA	The European Economic Area
FT	Financial Times (Business School Rankings)
GMAT	Graduate Management Admission Test
HE	Higher Education
HEI/HEIs	Higher Education Institution/Higher Education Institutions
ISM	International Student Mobility
LLM	Master of Laws
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
QS	Quacquarelli Symonds (World University Rankings)
Sikt	Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UiO	The University of Oslo

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1. Introduction

International student mobility (ISM) has been a topic of growing research interest over the past two decades, as higher education (HE) became increasingly internationalized in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. As students look abroad to further their academic goals, various concepts have been applied to examine the rationales behind this decision to matriculate at foreign higher education institutions (HEIs). What motivates these students to develop and execute a plan to leave behind the familiarity of their native country and migrate to an entirely new place to pursue educational opportunities? One such view is that of ISM as a push and pull of different migratory elements, where push factors drive the student away from HE in their home country and pull factors attract the student to a country abroad to pursue their academic objectives (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). While ISM is a well-researched area within HE, opportunities remain to contribute fresh insights about this topic - especially following the complete upheaval that tertiary education students, institutions, and systems experienced over the past few years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, this report offers new research on the motivations of international students who chose to pursue a master's degree in Norway amidst against the setting of a global pandemic, a novel and contemporary lens with which to examine the landscape of ISM today.

1.1 Internationalization of Higher Education

When examining internationalization in HE, it is useful to begin with a contextualization of what the term “internationalization” means within this environment. In addition, when considering internationalization, it is crucial to consider the wider perspective of how it functions across various levels and engages an array of stakeholders, from students to universities to HE systems nationally. Thus, Knight's (2015) comprehensive definition that “internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (p. 2) offers a solid foundation with which to consider the methods and objectives of internationalization initiatives. In practice, these activities take place in a multitude of forms, and a few examples include students participating in academic experiences abroad, targeted marketing outreach efforts that promote opportunities for university study to foreign students and recruiting tuition fee-paying international undergraduate and postgraduate students (Seeber, Meoli and Cattaneo, 2018, p. 147). While

many of these initiatives operate synergistically, one of the most familiar internationalization activities at the tertiary education level, and the focal point for this thesis, is ISM. As a definition that provides context for this study, “internationally mobile students are individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in the country of destination, where the country of destination of a given student is different from their country of origin” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023). These activities may take the form of shorter-term sojourns abroad, such as academic exchanges for one or two semesters, or longer-term foreign study when completing a full degree program abroad. For the purposes of this project, the focus will be on this latter group. The research seeks to examine internationally mobile graduate students who have made a cross-border educational journey in order to better understand how they navigated various motivational factors throughout the decision-making process before finally choosing to study in Norway.

Within the landscape of HE today, it is important to consider: why is ISM important? As noted by Wiers-Jenssen (2019), student mobility serves as the most visible form of the internationalization of HE, and its rationales intersect with the more general rationales broadly underlying internationalization, namely for academic, economic, political, and social/cultural reasons (p. 283). Therefore, understanding ISM provides valuable opportunities to reflect on the different motives of its stakeholders, which include national governments, HEIs, and the students themselves. When considering the scope and scale of ISM within modern tertiary education, the OECD statistics below demonstrate the substantial impact of international students.

- During the 2020 academic year, there were 4.4 million international students enrolled in HE in OECD countries, marking a 70% increase from a decade prior.
- International students accounted for 10% of all OECD HE student enrollment in 2020.
- The international student population is well-represented across all tertiary education levels in OECD countries, making up 7% of students enrolled at the bachelor’s level, 17% at the master’s level, and 26% at the doctoral level in the 2020 academic year.
- More than a third (1.4 million) of the international students matriculating in HE in 2020 were undertaking their studies in a European OECD country.

Source: OECD International Migration Outlook 2022 (pp. 120-122)

Thus, HE stakeholders arguably have a substantial interest in ISM's capacity to thrive - a fact that became even more sharply visible in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic brought international student migration to a virtual standstill on an unprecedented global scale.

1.2 Study Rationale

Comprising such a crucial component of today's tertiary education sector, ISM offers a rich area for HE research, and this study adds the dimension of international students deciding to migrate for educational activities during the exceptional times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Examining the why behind students deciding to enroll in a foreign HEI, such as the concept of push and pull factors identified by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), yields practical insights to better understand the motives behind such a life-altering move. This thesis seeks to capture perspectives about motivational factors for pursuing full degree foreign study, while situating the pandemic as a new type of factor that these students had to navigate in the ISM process. Such research provides useful information at a critical period for universities and national governments, as the COVID-19 pandemic has led them to think again about ISM to "reconsider the motivations...of these students" which "serendipitously ...becomes an opportunity to better understand how to cater to these students beyond the crisis itself" (Shkoler and Rabenu, 2022, pp. 1-2). Contemporary ISM research can be a valuable tool for HE stakeholders at this time of reflection and renewal when developing strategic approaches that serve to highlight their most attractive attributes to prospective international students.

Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies can be effectively applied in ISM research; ultimately, this study utilized a qualitative approach. While effective for determining empirical relationships and numerically describing the findings, particularly across a large number of observations, quantitative research is less suitable for explaining the reasons why behind the findings; conversely, undertaking a qualitative methodology affords the opportunity for an in-depth examination of a smaller number of observations that enables the researcher to tap into the perceptions and feelings of the study's participants (Stockemer, 2019, pp. 8-9). A survey could be a quantitative methodology through which a researcher could shed light on this topic; however, for the scope of this master's thesis, this approach would be challenging when taking into account the far greater demands of survey research in terms of time requirements and sufficient sample size. Thus, in considering the basis for this study, to explore the motivations of international students as they navigated the decision-

making process for pursuing a graduate degree abroad, a qualitative methodology was selected as the best fit to achieve this purpose. Furthermore, an individual interview approach was chosen for this research, allowing for the students to go in-depth to share their own personal narratives, and the research methodology section provides additional context regarding why interviews are well-suited for this project. Overall, the rationale behind this study was to collect meaningful data to help further an understanding about the motives behind applying for a master's degree in a foreign country during the times of a global pandemic and how the decision-making journey for these students brought them to Norway.

1.3 Study Research Aims and Relevance

When thinking about the aims of this ISM research, it was relevant and timely to focus on master's students coming from countries outside of the EU/EEA (European Union/European Economic Area), and this study concentrates on those from two HEIs in Oslo: The University of Oslo (UiO) and BI Norwegian Business School (BI). It bears mentioning that in the Norwegian HE context, BI is classified as a specialized university; however, for efficiency purposes, BI and UiO will both be referred to using the broad term of "universities" in this thesis. As will be addressed in the research methodology section, examining the mobility motives of participants from home countries beyond the European continent is especially pertinent during an era of transformative change in Norway for full degree international students from these regions. Thus, analyzing student-centered perspectives about why they chose to go abroad for their graduate programs and why they selected to come to Norway are important, as they relate to several impactful outcomes of this research for HE stakeholders.

First, there is the matter of rethinking what ISM to Norway looks like with the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic having stabilized. In speaking about the current state of ISM, Yang and Tian (2023) highlight its resilience and how "institutions and nations with vested interests in ISM will continue to promote and reinvent this field of activity, with reconfigured and renewed rationales and discourse" (p. iii). The timing is fitting for conversations about post-pandemic ISM in the Norwegian context. In fact, while the number of international students coming to Norway increased by 18% during the past 10 years, of all OECD countries, Norway is among those with the lowest proportion (4% in 2019) of international students, according to The Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (Status report for higher education 2023, pp. 49-50). Thus, there exists room for growth in Norway to attract

international students amongst competition from its fellow OECD nations. This fact was acknowledged in a white paper presented to the Norwegian parliament in late 2020 which stated that the country's ISM efforts must not only return to the normal pre-pandemic situation, but must improve (Ministry of Education and Research, 30 October 2020). Having rich, detailed qualitative data relating to the motivations that made international students decide to come to Norway for their graduate degrees provides valuable insights for the country's HE stakeholders to use for positioning Norway as a more appealing study destination compared to other regional competitors.

Second, the 2022-2023 timeframe in which this thesis project has been undertaken is one of monumental change for the entire tertiary education sector in Norway when it comes to international students. In October 2022, Norway's Research and Higher Education Minister at the time, Ola Borten Moe, announced a proposed amendment to introduce tuition fees beginning from the autumn 2023 semester for students coming to Norway for full degree programs from countries outside of the EU/EEA. This change was in direct contrast to the long-standing principle at Norwegian public (state) universities that education should be free for all students, regardless of where they come from. Following months of debate, this proposed tuition fee amendment was voted into place by Norway's parliament in June 2023, with the nation's public HEIs thus needing to rapidly adapt to this new requirement of charging tuition fees to these students at the start of the 2023-2024 academic year.

Currently, in late 2023 it is not yet possible to grasp the full implications for the country's tertiary education sector of this significant governmental policy change. Within the context of such an information deficit, this study offers valuable insights at a most critical juncture - when understanding the motivational factors behind why students from outside the EU/EEA chose to come to Norway and enroll in graduate degree programs at UiO and BI has perhaps never been more needed. BI is a private institution that had already been charging tuition and their two-year Master of Science degree programs cost over NOK 110 000 per year.

However, as a public university, UiO has not had any such tuition fees in place previously. Bjørn Stensaker, vice-rector for education at UiO, touched upon the need for the university to strategically recalibrate its approaches going forward, commenting: "with the introduction of tuition fees, we will need a revised strategy for internationalisation. The University of Oslo is a very internationally oriented university and maintaining and strengthening our profile here is important for us" (Myklebust, 2023). Accordingly, this study offers a compelling opportunity to analyze how economic motives such as tuition fees factored into decision-

making when choosing a Norwegian university like BI that charges tuition, the same position in which UiO now finds itself in.

Finally, of the 14,000 foreign students who were enrolled in tertiary education in Norway in 2022, of the top eight countries with the largest population of students in Norway, five are located outside of the EU/EEA: Bangladesh, China, India, Iran, and Pakistan (Directorate for Higher Education and Skills, Status report for higher education 2023, p. 50). These statistics raise important questions for the Norwegian HE community to reflect on, such as: will students from outside of Europe still feel pulled to Norway and choose it over other study destination options now that there are tuition fees in place at public HEIs that had formerly been tuition free? In addition, what new tactical approaches might Norwegian stakeholders from government and academia need to develop in order to attract international degree-seeking students in this new reality where the enrollment costs for these students have increased substantially? This study aims to provide qualitative data that these HE stakeholders could use to address such questions, by offering perspectives directly from non-EU/EEA students regarding their reasons for coming to study in Norway. These insights could be employed to assist with initiatives for marketing to international students following the ripple effects of both the pandemic and tuition fee policy changes in the country.

1.4 Research Problem and Research Questions

Research Problem

In executing a plan to uproot one's life and make an international move in order to pursue study opportunities in a new country, the function of push and pull factors as motivators throughout the decision-making process is as an intriguing area to explore. Accordingly, the overarching research problem for this study can be articulated by the following statement.

The motivations driving the decisions of international students to apply for graduate degree programs abroad and selecting Norway as their study destination during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The intention of this project is to develop a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary ISM, and the push and pull motivations that influenced the decision-making processes of these students who chose to start their graduate studies in Norway in 2021. Considering that the World Higher Education Database contains around 21,000 HEIs

spanning 196 countries and territories (International Association of Universities, 2023), the significance of motivating factors plays a critical role in international student choice when contemplating between such a multitude of academic options. Many countries, including Norway, report annually on quantitative data of international student flows, offering a macro-level overview of data trends for student mobility into the country. However, there are more nuanced insights to be learned about ISM in Norway by going deeper into detail to examine these students not just as statistics, but as unique individuals. Through conducting qualitative research via one-on-one interviews, this study addresses the research problem by seeking to understand how these students made decisions based on the significance of different motivational factors while assessing foreign study destination and institution options – all within the context of an unprecedented worldwide pandemic.

Research Questions

Building upon the aforementioned research problem, this thesis poses the following two research questions related to ISM:

- **RQ1:** For international master's students, what motivational factors were most significant when applying for degree programs abroad during a global pandemic?
- **RQ2:** What motivational factors ultimately pulled these international students to select Oslo, Norway as the destination for their graduate studies?

The connectivity of these two research questions offers opportunities to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how participants navigated their varying motivations along their journeys for pursuing degree programs abroad - from the beginning of the process in 2020 in determining where to apply, to the eventual decision that brought them to Norway to start their studies in autumn 2021. Researching the decision-making processes of these international students through RQ1 and RQ2 adds to the existing body of ISM research by providing a unique depiction of the experiences of being an international applicant navigating motivational factors to choose a foreign study destination against the backdrop of the pandemic. The next section of the report provides an examination of relevant ISM literature that connect to some of the key themes in this study.

2. Literature Review

For the scope of this literature review, the research problem served as the focal point - the motivations in decision-making for international students applying for graduate degree programs abroad at the time of the pandemic and choosing to come to Norway. The section begins with background details about how the literature review process for this thesis was managed, followed by a discussion of relevant ISM literature organized by thematic areas.

2.1 Background and Context

As there is a considerable wealth of academic literature about ISM, it was essential to take a strategic approach in reviewing the existing literature before determining what to include in this review. In order to capture both longer-term and more recent perspectives about internationally mobile students in HE, the literature review parameters focused on academic research from the 21st century. Mazzarol and Soutar's 2002 article about push-pull factors in international student migration is a seminal work in relation to this thesis, and thus research conducted over roughly the past two decades since 2002 helped to narrow down the timeframe in order to concentrate the literature search process.

The literature search occurred in several phases: an initial limited literature search was first conducted in May/June 2022 during the ideation process for this thesis topic, which was expanded for further searching again in September/October 2022 as the thesis proposal was fleshed out, and a final check to capture more recent topical literature in May/June 2023. Using UiO's Oria database, specific keywords were searched to find peer-reviewed academic literature connected to this study's research topic: *international higher education, international students in Norway, international student destination choice, international mobility of students, mobility capital, push-pull model, international student decision-making, and international student mobility during the pandemic*. In order to manage the extensive number of results found during this search process, the research problem and research questions helped to guide what was most significant to include. Therefore, this literature review has been organized with a focus on particular thematic areas within ISM that connect to key aspects of this project: push and pull motivational factors, decision-making processes, COVID-19, mobility capital, and international students coming to Norway.

2.2 Push and Pull Motivational Factors for International Student Mobility

When examining the body of literature addressing ISM, one major theme that emerges is exploring the motivational factors involved in the HE migration process. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) were innovative in applying the push-pull concept of migration to international study choice, providing a valuable frame for examining the economic and social factors that push students away from their home country to pursue HE abroad, and the pull factors that attract students towards a new country as their international study destination. They described the process of selecting a foreign study destination as being influenced by six overarching factors of importance: knowledge and awareness of the country, personal recommendations, cost issues, the environment, geographic proximity, and social links. Looking at research findings from studies conducted with students from four selected Asian countries, the authors were able to identify a set of common push and pull factors across this sample group to explain why these students had chosen Australia as the destination country for their studies. Push factors included the overseas course being of better quality than studies offered at home and gaining a better understanding of Western culture, and pull factors included lower tuition fees and having friends/relatives in the country. In addition, they looked at motivations in the selection of particular HEIs within Australia, identifying the most influential factors attracting students to a specific university, such as innovation in research and teaching and having a large population of international students enrolled. While their study was somewhat limited in geographical scope, Mazzarol and Soutar's research was foundational in its novel application of the push-pull migration concept as a lens through which to research ISM.

Another valuable framing of push and pull factors was made by Caruso and de Wit (2015) who researched the determinants of mobility for European students within the European Union and discussed three general categories for push and pull factors: 1) economic factors, 2) social/political/cultural factors, and 3) educational factors. Examples noted by the authors include: the economic factors of financial capacity (push) and employment opportunities during and after study (pull), the social/political/cultural factors of political instability (push) and academic freedom (pull), and the educational factors of the ranking/status of HE being perceived as lower in the home country (push) compared to better in the host country (pull). They found that students chose to study in a country based on the combination of the factor categories that they found to be most significant; for instance, economically, in terms of the conditions in the host country (richer countries being more attractive) and socially/politically/culturally in terms of the level of safety and openness in the host country.

Their organization of the factors driving ISM by the categories of economic, educational, and social/political/cultural offers an effective template for examining determinants for student mobility that can be adapted for structuring the motivational factor types in this thesis.

A more recent examination that centered around push-pull factors is that of Hailat, Alsmadi, Nassar and Chung (2022) who investigated the influence of these factors among a group of students from Arabian Gulf countries who chose to pursue their tertiary education at a university in the United Kingdom. Using a qualitative interview approach to look at the reasons these students did not study in their home countries and what drove them to choose the United Kingdom as their foreign study destination, the authors noted that students from this area of the world are often overlooked in push-pull research on ISM. Six push factors were identified (including poor education at home, the program of study not being available in the home country, and personal reasons), along with 10 pull factors (including an excellent teaching and learning environment, opportunities for work, and religious tolerance). They connect these push-pull factors to opportunities for the United Kingdom government and universities to build brand awareness in the competition to attract Arabian Gulf students to study there, particularly as the Gulf region already has a large number of well-regarded international branch campuses these students may also be considering. The authors emphasize on the value of raising awareness about the United Kingdom as a study destination is an important takeaway from the article, as many nations and HEIs around the world focus their resources on developing international student recruitment strategies as part of their internationalization efforts.

Zhang, O'Shea and Mou (2021) also built on the push-pull model and brought in new perspectives by applying this framework to study a sample population of international PhDs in Canada. In examining the decision-making of these international PhDs, the authors felt the traditional push-pull model to be too broad and thus developed their own framework that combined push-pull factors with international education decision-making mechanisms across three distinct layers – the individual level, the institutional level, and the country level. They found that push-pull factors operated more strongly at the country and institutional levels than at the individual level, such as finding variations in decision-making based on the PhDs home region; however, their findings also indicated that all three levels may interrelate and can function both as push or as pull factors. Overall, this research provides a more nuanced perspective of how to consider the established push-pull concept for international student migration. When researching the nexus of push-pull factors for international graduate study

and educational decision-making within this thesis, the approach taken by Zhang et. al is helpful in shaping the conceptual model that will be further elucidated in the theoretical framework section of the report.

2.3 Decision-Making Processes for International Student Mobility

The theme of decision-making processes has also been a main area of focus within literature on ISM. Oliveira and Soares (2016) applied consumer behavior concepts from marketing to analyze the behavior of students (as “consumers”) when choosing a university abroad. To better understand the personal motivations of international students in their decision-making, they developed a comprehensive model based on findings from their research with a group of international students from seven countries who were studying in Portugal. Their model focuses on three initial stages of decision-making for students as HE consumers: 1) need recognition - influenced by the factors motivating them to study abroad, 2) information search - influenced by information gathered from various sources about foreign universities, and 3) evaluation of alternatives - influenced by the factors students consider when making the decision of which international institution to attend. In paying considerably higher tuition fees than domestic students in many countries, choosing a HEI abroad can become a significant consumer investment for students. Therefore, this research provides a consumer-centered approach through which to evaluate international student decision-making within the global HE marketplace that is useful to bear in mind for this project focused on mobility to Norway.

Regarding international students choosing a study destination country, Eder, Smith and Pitts (2010) looked at how structural factors can impact the decision-making process, identifying two main structural factors that influence international study: visa issues and money. These can act as constraints against the push and pull motivations in the individual student’s decision-making process; practicalities mean that a student may dream of studying in a particular country, but if they cannot obtain a study visa to go there or afford to pay the tuition costs, that destination becomes untenable no matter how strong the pull may be. Their research highlights all the smaller choices that international students need to make along the way, as well as the role of any constraining factors they must navigate in their decision-making. As a means of evaluating what may and may not be practically feasible when figuring out the way forward on their ISM journeys, these authors center the individual

situations of the student as a core element as they make a final decision about their destination of study.

Maringe and Carter (2007) investigated student decision-making amongst a population of students from Africa who were studying in the United Kingdom, and similarly determined that the choices made during this process were guided by push and pull factors, as well as by fears and anxieties associated with studying in a foreign country. They identified five general categories of risk amongst these international students: financial risk, opportunity costs, family/socio-cultural risks, legal administrative risks, and academic risks. Furthermore, the authors also drew upon the concept of consumer behavior to describe how issues such as the difficulties with the university application process or financial issues can create dissatisfaction amongst these international students during the various stages of decision-making. While challenges similar to these have always existed for students navigating the process of pursuing foreign study, the recent pandemic added entirely new complexities, which HE researchers have only just begun to explore; investigating pandemic-related fears and anxieties serves as an important aspect for the research conducted in this thesis.

2.4 COVID-19 and International Student Mobility

The next theme focused on the very recent research examining the COVID-19 pandemic and ISM. Mok and Zhang (2022) looked at the pandemic's impact on the choice of study destination and how pandemic factors might hinder students from following through with their plans to go abroad. Conducting surveys with university students in China, the authors found that perceptions of how the pandemic was being managed in terms of case numbers and severity made some countries more appealing (Canada) and others less appealing (the United States) as study destinations. The authors noted that students were concerned about pursuing their studies abroad due to issues like health and safety in a foreign country, quarantine requirements making returning to China difficult, and travel restrictions preventing students from going abroad to attend courses in-person. Another finding of Mok and Zhang (2022) was that Chinese students who had prior experiences of overseas academic exchanges were more likely (22.3%) to be willing to study internationally during the pandemic than students (5.7%) who had never participated in academic exchanges (p. 240).

Yang (2022) also examines the bigger picture of the COVID-19 pandemic as the latest in a string of interconnected crises (economic, geopolitical, etc.) impacting ISM. For instance, the

author cites how Australia's ban on travelers from China in 2020 suspended the country's inflow of Chinese students, which then caused a fiscal crisis for Australian universities that had become heavily reliant on the tuition fees provided by these foreign students. Another example discussed is the rise of racism and xenophobia towards individuals from Asia in Western countries during the pandemic based on inflammatory rhetoric (such as COVID-19 being referred to as a "Chinese virus"), leading to personal safety concerns from Asian students that made Western nations less appealing as international study destinations. While most of the short-term logistical crises of the pandemic (quarantine requirements, travel bans, etc.) for HE have since abated, this article effectively situates the pandemic as just one of the critical challenges that has confronted ISM at a worldwide level. However, other global crises remain, which is useful to consider as a context that may impact the motives of international students in the push to leave the home country and the pull to pursue their studies abroad.

2.5 Mobility Capital and International Student Mobility

Another relevant thematic area of literature about international students centers on the concept of "mobility capital," a term originated by Murphy-Lejeune (2002) to describe how internationally mobile students are able to accumulate distinctive skills through the process of learning how to adapt to a foreign environment. Hovdhaugen and Wiers-Jenssen (2021) examined the relationship between motivations for studying abroad and the influence of mobility capital as it relates to the students' previous experiences with international mobility. They concluded that mobility capital has relevance for international student motivations, as students possessing high mobility capital are more likely to: 1) consider prospects for pursuing an international career as a motivating factor for undertaking a degree abroad and 2) have a perception of higher quality educational options that may exist overseas, in terms of institutional academic quality and prestige. Of particular relevance to this thesis project, Hovdhaugen and Wiers-Jenssen (2021) mention that an area for further research could be looking into how mobility capital might influence international students' choice of a foreign host country and university. This will be addressed in this study when considering the previous mobility experiences of participants and how this influenced their decision to pursue a graduate degree outside of their home country.

Additionally, a related contribution is that of Brooks and Waters (2009), who examined the motivations of students from the United Kingdom completing a full degree overseas. One of

their key findings was the existence of a significant connection between prior international travel experiences and the propensity to proactively seek out full degree educational opportunities abroad. Furthermore, the authors also discovered an apparent tendency amongst these students studying overseas to use their experiences attending an international institution as a catalyst to seek out further opportunities for employment and potential permanent relocation abroad after the conclusion of their degree program. It is interesting to observe that while their description of this population of students from the United Kingdom undertaking outbound mobility seems very much to reflect the concept of mobility capital (with one international experience leading to another), the authors do not employ the term mobility capital in relation to their research. Regardless of using the specific terminology of mobility capital or not, the finding by the authors that permanent international relocation for employment after studies can be a motivational factor is valuable to consider when conducting research on students undertaking a full degree abroad.

2.6 Norway and Inbound International Student Mobility

As the case study for this project is focused on non-EU/EEA students who have chosen to come to Norway for their master's degrees, the final theme for this literature review is that of inbound mobility for international students to Norway. In examining what makes international students choose Norway as their destination of study, it is helpful for contextualization to consider what efforts are being made to draw in these students. The study conducted by Sin, Antonowicz and Wiers-Jenssen (2021) focuses on these efforts at the national level in Norway in terms of international student recruitment policies and strategies. They identified that political and academic rationales are the greatest motivations in the Norwegian context, with economic rationales occupying a far lesser role. In the global competition to attract international students, the authors characterize Norway as a "semi-peripheral" country – one that is able to attract foreign students, though not on the same scale as the major importers of international students, such as the United States or Australia. Sin et al. also highlight how Norway increases its attractiveness as a foreign study destination because of the absence of tuition fees for international students at the country's public HEIs, as well as promoting aspects such as its pristine natural beauty, safety, and prosperity as key attractors to maintain its foothold in the international education marketplace.

Another perspective on why students choose to come to Norway from abroad is outlined in the literature of Wiers-Jenssen (2019), based on survey research conducted with international students participating in Norwegian HE both for academic exchanges and full degrees. In examining the factors that pulled these students to select the country as their study destination, the findings indicated that for all students (regardless of where in the world they come from), programs and courses being taught in English, the peacefulness of the society, and career opportunities at home and elsewhere were highly important factors. The author found that for full degree international students, the most significant rationale for choosing Norway was its lack of tuition fees. Another key rationale was improving career prospects in Norway, which was noted as highlighting that a more longer-term migration to the country may be influencing this choice. These findings certainly provide some useful points for the second research question posed in the thesis about the Norwegian-specific motivational factors that pulled participants to the country to pursue their master's degrees.

2.7 Reflecting on the Literature Review

This section presented a review of the literature that can be found in the wider body of academic research on HE, focusing on thematic areas of ISM that are of relevance to this study: motivations connected to push-pull factors, the student decision-making process, student mobility and the COVID-19 pandemic, the influence of mobility capital in pursuing educational opportunities abroad, and why international students chose Norway. In this literature, much attention is given to the push behind why students were drawn away from their home country and the pull to explain why they came to a particular study destination country. This thesis investigates the application and selection process that exists in between the initial desire to leave one's home country and making the move abroad, focusing on the decisions that occur as international students navigate their motivations during this journey. Because it is so recent, undertaking this literature review process in 2022 and 2023 revealed that there does not yet exist a robust amount of ISM research looking into COVID-19 as a factor for students to consider as they pursued options for foreign study during the pandemic. Therefore, this thesis seeks to contribute new and timely perspectives to the HE literature to address the nexus of motivational factors and decision-making for ISM that played out within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on from this literature review, the next key foundational element to discuss is the theory and conceptual framework supporting the empirical research undertaken in this study.

3. Theoretical Framework

The following section covers agency theory as it pertains to this project, provides an explanation as to how student agency has been operationalized for this research, and concludes with an overview of the conceptual framework model that serves as the study's theoretical foundation.

3.1 Theoretical Context: Students and Agency

The theoretical perspective of agency has been applied to examine student motivations in decision-making for pursuing graduate degree opportunities abroad, specifically the concept of students and individual agency. From Emirbayer and Mische (1998), a general definition of agency is: how humans as actors engage through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment in response to the changing situations in their environment (p. 970). For the purposes of this ISM research, the notion of agency has been applied more precisely to the work of Gambetta (1987) who developed a theoretical framework for student agency in educational decision-making. In his work, Gambetta (1987) outlined three perspectives of students as individual agents: 1) *the structuralist view* – where one's behavior is guided by external constraints that leaves little room for individual choice, 2) *the pushed from behind view* – where psychological and social factors such as norms, beliefs, and values act as inner mechanisms that are clouded from a person's consciousness and drive them towards a certain course of action, and 3) *the pulled from the front view* – where one takes purposeful action based upon their intentions, weighs up their possibilities and the future rewards attached to each option, and then chooses the option they are most attracted to. Zhang et al. (2021) employed Gambetta's framework in their study of decision-making amongst foreign PhDs who had decided to pursue their studies in Canada, demonstrating the applicability of Gambetta's theoretical perspectives of student agency for HE research on ISM.

Gambetta's views of student agency will similarly be used as a foundation to frame this study's focus on assessing master's students' motivations when making decisions to pursue a degree program internationally. When describing these three distinct perspectives of student agency, Gambetta (1987) posed a question about these students that he sought to address in his research: when it came to educational decision-making, were the students pushed, or did they jump? This parallels the previously mentioned push-pull concept of Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), which also serves as a key component for the research framework: the shared notions

that student migration decisions are influenced by pushing factors to leave the home country and then the idea of jumping aligns to the pulling factors drawing students abroad to a new study location. Thus, integrating the three perspectives of student agency with the push-pull model offers a comprehensive strategy to research motivational factors for ISM decision-making and the subsequent selection of Norway as a study destination. In developing the frame for this study, the structuralist/external constraints view and the pushed from behind view have both been correlated with push factors driving the student away from studying in their home country. The pulled from the front view has been correlated to the pull factors that draw the student towards academic options abroad. Exploring the nature of the push and pull factors that are motivating mobility decisions offers an opportunity to examine the individual agency of students during this process as they navigate critical decisions about where to study, both in terms of countries and HEIs. In doing so, the theoretical context for this thesis follows the established path set by Zhang et al. (2021) who joined together the work of Gambetta with Mazzarol and Soutar in the theoretical framing for their research study of why foreign PhDs chose to come to Canada.

3.2 Operationalizing the Concept of Student Agency

As a means for operationalizing the theoretical context of student individual agency with push-pull factors when making ISM decisions, it is beneficial to first outline a couple key components for this project. One of the most fundamental characteristics that shapes the research design is defining the unit of analysis for the study. As noted by Patton (2002), in making this determination, the main focus should be “to decide what it is you want to be able to say something about at the end of the study” (p. 229). To evaluate the two research questions that have been posed, the unit of analysis for this study has been identified as individual students and their motivations - as they consider their options and make determinations in their journey to foreign study at the time of a global pandemic. By centering individual students and their motivations as the unit of analysis, the data collection and analysis for this project will focus on what is happening to the individuals in this setting and how they are affected by the setting (Patton, 2002, p. 228). In this study, the individuals and the setting are the 10 participants who had to navigate their mobility motivations whilst applying to and selecting a master's degree program abroad in 2020-2021 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach also reflects the definition of agency from Emirbayer and Mische (1998) – how people, in this case, international master’s students, engage in

responding to evolving situations in their environment, such as making important educational decisions in the context of a rapidly changing and chaotic worldwide pandemic.

Another key characteristic necessary for understanding how the theoretical framing for this thesis project has been operationalized is that of the study's variables. In empirical research, variables are conventionally a signature of a quantitative methodological approach, in that they are characteristics of an individual, which vary among the participants being studied, and that can be quantifiably measured (Cresswell, 2014, p. 52). However, variables can still serve as a useful focal point to help shape observations during qualitative research. The variables in the scope of this qualitative study would be the push and pull factors which are driving the distinctive motivations of these students - as they navigate their personal choices and prioritize their options for foreign academic opportunities in order to reach a final decision on their international study destination country and institution. These push and pull factor variables will encompass the three categories noted by Caruso and de Wit (2015) of economic factors, educational factors, and social/political/cultural factors as motivators for mobility.

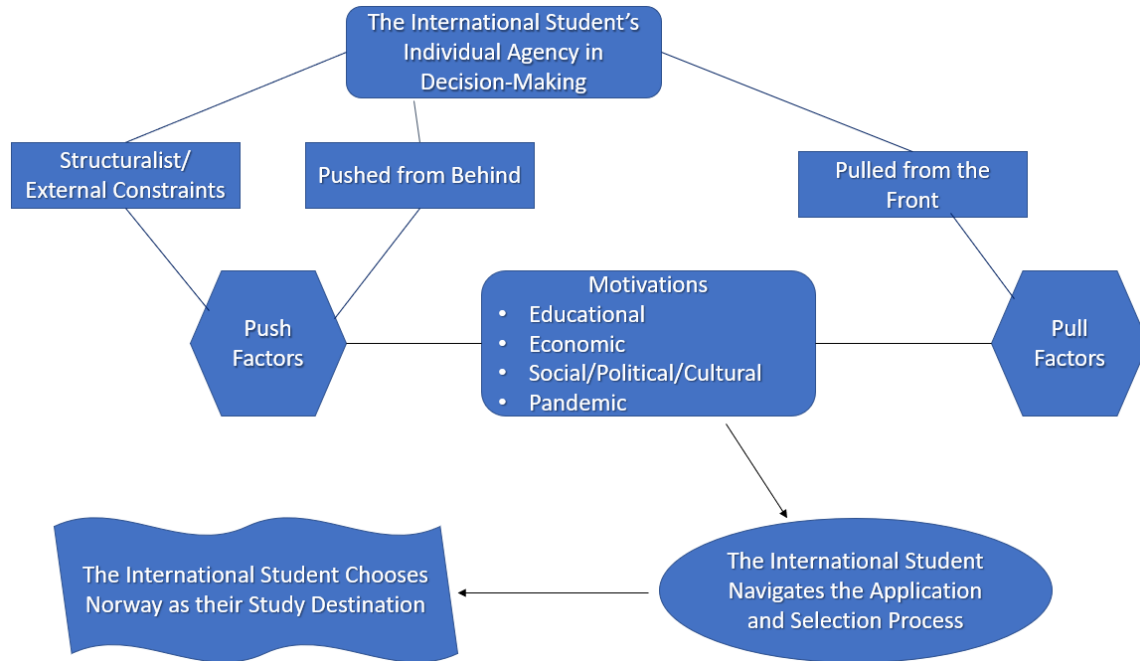
In relation to RQ1 which asks what motivations were most significant when applying for degree programs abroad during a global pandemic, this study builds on Caruso and de Wit and adds in a new motivational category - the pandemic, to examine how this variable may have been a push and/or pull factor in student decision-making. In terms of RQ2, pull factors serve as the variables that can be evaluated to understand what attracted participants to come to BI and UiO for their graduate studies, providing points for comparison to seek out commonalities and differences about the motivations that led them to choose Norway and these universities. The theoretical perspective of agency as it relates to student decision-making for international mobility will be examined in the discussion section in relation to the findings for RQ1 and RQ2 and will thus offer insights about the interplay between individual agency and the push and pull factor variables observed in this study.

3.3. Conceptual Framework Model

Building on how the theoretical foundation of agency has been operationalized in this thesis research on ISM and the decision-making process, the model in Figure 3.1 below has been developed as a visual depiction of this project's comprehensive conceptual framework. This framework model has been designed to illustrate the theoretical context of the international

student and their individual agency in educational decision-making in order to address the two research questions being investigated in this study.

Figure 3.1 Conceptual Framework Model



Within this model, the connections between the theoretical perspectives of individual agency in educational decision-making from Gambetta’s structuralist/external constraints and pushed from behind views have been linked with Mazzarol and Soutar’s push factors, and Gambetta’s pulled from the front view has been linked with Mazzarol and Soutar’s pull factors for international student migration. At the center of the model are the four categories of motivational factors for international study that will be analyzed from the collected data: educational, economic, social/political/cultural, and the pandemic. As these various motivational factors push and/or pull, the study will look at how they influence a student’s decisions as they navigate their way through applying for graduate programs abroad within the context of the pandemic (RQ1). Thereafter, as the student completes the mobility decision-making process, this thesis will use this frame to look at why the participants ultimately chose Norway as the country they are most pulled to for their master’s degree studies abroad (RQ2). The conceptual framework design thus encapsulates a pathway for organizing this study’s data collection and analysis process that aligns with both its theoretical context and two research questions to offer new insights for ISM research.

4. Research Methodology

The next section of the report details how the research methodology for this thesis was developed and executed. It covers the methodological approaches that shaped this project, as they relate to the research design: the case study definition and selection, recruitment and overview of participants, data collection and analysis, as well as research validity, ethical considerations, and research limitations.

4.1 Research Design

A qualitative design was chosen to explore international graduate students and their motivations for mobility to Norway at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research emphasizes developing an understanding of the behavior, values, and beliefs of the participants, by centering around “the perspective of those being studied—what they see as important and significant - provides the point of orientation” (Bryman, 2012, p. 408).

Because both research questions relate to forming a better understanding about how international graduate students perceive the motivations behind their mobility journeys, a deeper dive into their internal thought processes better fits a qualitative approach. This allows the researcher to get more detailed, insightful data about a participant’s point of view as compared to a quantitative approach.

Furthermore, because the COVID-19 pandemic marks a unique and extraordinary era, examining how international students navigated their mobility motivations within this setting is well-aligned with a qualitative methodology, which allows for “adopting a flexible approach to a situation to be understood” (Richards, 2015, p. 38). The impact of the pandemic on ISM necessitates flexibility in what might be uncovered to further understanding of this topic. Accordingly, as Richards (2015) explains, taking a qualitative approach is well-suited for when the situation being studied is complex and has to be understood in its context (p. 38). The structured approach of quantitative research would likely not capture the nuances and complexities motivating the mobility journeys of these students during a global pandemic as effectively as a qualitative approach could.

The qualitative methodology of this study is rooted in the research paradigms of an interpretivist epistemology and a constructivist ontology. Constructivism espouses that social interaction and social order remain always in a perpetual state of change and that the researcher presents a specific version of social reality, as opposed to one that could be

regarded as definitive (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). A constructivist ethos aligns well with this study's research problem that is investigating decision-making, which by its very nature is an evolving process with choices that are personal to each individual. Interpretivism emphasizes seeking to understand human social behavior, as opposed to trying to explain it and is "predicated upon the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people" (Bryman, 2012, p. 31). Because every international student has their own reasons driving their mobility motivations, interpretivism suits this research as it supports the diverse spectrum of motives behind each individual's decision-making journey. Additionally, interpretivism is often connected to a qualitative approach, and as Bryman (2012) notes, "taking an interpretative stance can mean that the researcher may come up with surprising findings" (p. 31). An unprecedented global pandemic impacting HE students globally is beneficial for designing a research project that allows for whatever findings might emerge from the data within the context of such extraordinary times.

To best execute this research, the design was built around an interview-based approach, specifically that of individual interviews. For data collection purposes, interviews accomplish some crucial objectives: interviewing allows you to find out those things from people that cannot be observed directly, with the purpose of entering into the interviewee's perspective, and is based on the idea that the perspective of other people is "meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (Patton, 2002, pp. 340-341). The rationale for selecting interviewing as the methodological approach ties directly back to the research questions this study is seeking to better understand. The unit of analysis – students' motivations for mobility – is not something that can be outwardly observed. Thus, a tool like interviewing is needed to enable the researcher to go inward through a dialogue that provides for follow-up and clarifying questions, in order to access the participants' point of view regarding their motivations for mobility. Individual interviews provide a conversational forum for their personal perspectives to be illuminated. Finally, an interviewing approach also complements the theoretical construct of agency that is foundational for this thesis, to understand how international students as individual agents navigated the push and pull of motivational factors associated with leaving their home country and pursuing graduate opportunities abroad.

4.2 Case Study Design and Selection

Within the qualitative interview research methodology, a case study approach was developed, "in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case" (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). In order to

effectively examine the research questions guiding this study, looking with a sufficient level of depth at the selected case is necessary to yield findings worthy of discussion following data collection and analysis. Additionally, in a case study the “research is concerned with the complexity and particular nature of the case in question” (Bryman, 2012, p. 66), and seeking to understand the perspectives of the participants about their motivations during decision-making is a complex phenomenon that requires examination in the detailed and intensive way that a case study approach can provide. Tracy (2010) outlines specific criteria associated with quality in qualitative research, including concepts which apply to the rationale behind the case selection for this study. One of the author’s criteria is that the research should be looking at a “worthy topic” - meaning one that is significant and interesting, and perhaps something that has grown out of timely societal events (2010, p. 840). Because the COVID-19 era was so recent and unparalleled in modern history due to its worldwide impact, it has the characteristics of being both a timely and significant opportunity to examine the pandemic’s influences on international students’ motivations for mobility.

“Meaningful coherence” is another of Tracy’s quality criteria, where “studies that are meaningfully coherent eloquently interconnect their research design, data collection, and analysis with their theoretical framework and situational goals” (2010, p. 848). The research questions posed in this thesis were used to formulate the case selection, to design a case that aligned with the aim of this research: to investigate and enhance understanding of motivations for mobility, both within the context of pandemic times and the reasons behind international students choosing Norway. The parameters of this case study were selected accordingly to unite the overarching research problem, research questions, and the conceptual framework combining student agency and push-pull factors. In the remainder of this section, the key elements of the case study will be outlined, with rationales to detail why these particular aspects were chosen to create the design for this research.

International students can constitute a wide and varied group; therefore, it was important to first determine a specific population that would be most fitting to include in this case study. As the data collection process occurred in early 2023, it was decided the case would center on students who began their studies in the autumn 2021 semester, and who at that time of interviews were currently enrolled in the second year of their master’s programs. Selecting students who began their studies in 2021 was contextually important because the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, and these students were hence navigating the application and selection process for foreign university admission at the height of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, a crucial timeframe for the case study. The focus on master’s level students for this case study came about for two main reasons. First, in

conducting the literature review process, it seemed that an abundance of the existing research on ISM was concentrated on mobility at the undergraduate level. Thus, there appeared to be a useful opportunity to contribute original research on a lesser-focused aspect, that of graduate level ISM. Second, there was a personal connection through being a member of this particular student population and having been inspired by prior conversations with peers about what drove their mobility journeys to study for a master's degree abroad and the decision to do so in Norway. This also linked well to the coherence of this study's research aim, to broaden understanding on mobility motivations and the choice of Norway.

Another important element for this case was selecting its geographical parameters, particularly when considering the concept of push-pull migration – whom should be the focal point for inclusion in the study? The decision was made to look at students who have been pushed from countries located outside the European Union (EU)/European Economic Area (EEA) and who chose to enroll in graduate degree programs at two universities in Oslo. As was mentioned in the introduction, of the top eight sending countries for international students coming to Norway in 2022, five were located outside of the EU/EEA according to data from the Directorate for Higher Education and Skills, so it is highly pertinent to learn more about the mobility motives for these non-EU/EEA students (Status report for higher education 2023, p. 50). Additionally, the case selection involved determining that each study participant should come from a different country. This decision was connected to the fact that according to The City Government of Oslo, the capital is home to approximately 8,000 international students from over 65 countries (Mæland, 2022). Thus, because the international student body in the city comes from such a wide array of places, having a broader scope of mobility perspectives from different nations allowed for the research to be more inclusive of what the diverse international student population of Oslo actually looks like.

In terms of selecting the pull destination country to look at for this case, the decision to focus on Norway was prompted by current events that transpired during the process of developing the proposal for this thesis. In October 2022, the country's then Research and Higher Education Minister, Ola Borten Moe, announced a proposed plan to start charging tuition to non-EU/EEA students coming to do degrees in Norway beginning with the autumn 2023 semester. As a complete reversal from the established principle that education in Norway should be free for all, this proposed policy change attracted a lot of attention and sparked much critical debate amongst the government and stakeholders from the country's tertiary education sector. The timeliness of being able to conduct this study during such a

transformative era within the history of Norwegian HE was a phenomenal research opportunity and a highly appealing reason in choosing Norway for this case. Furthermore, by focusing on non-EU/EEA students specifically, they represent the very subset of international degree-seeking students who in the future would be impacted by the Norwegian government's policy changes to start charging tuition fees. Consequently, exploring the particular factors that motivated these students' choice of Norway as the international destination for their graduate degrees offers extremely important and timely viewpoints to understand in 2023 – especially when considering that Norway was already a country on the “semi-periphery” when it came to attracting international students (Sin et al., 2021).

A final key element for this case study was selecting which HEIs in Norway to include. Located in the same city and of relatively similar size with student bodies of approximately 25,000 and 20,000 respectively, UiO and BI were the institutions chosen for this case. UiO and BI each offer master's level programs that are taught in English, which help attract scores of international students. In fact, both institutions have roughly similar percentages of foreign students within their overall student body, with about 13% at UiO and 11% at BI according to data from Norway's Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (2023). While these are useful commonalities to draw on for the purposes of this research, it was one of the major differences between UiO and BI that most significantly guided their inclusion in this study.

These two Norwegian universities were specifically chosen because BI is a private HEI and UiO is a public HEI. As a public university, UiO did not at the time have any tuition fees for international students. Whereas as a private university, BI charges tuition - so students selecting to enroll for a master's degree at BI have a financial fee-paying component to take into consideration during the application and selection process. In interviewing international master's students who began their studies in 2021, those applying to and selecting BI had to navigate a tuition component, while at that time, those applying to and selecting UiO did not. By including both institutions, it shapes a compelling dichotomy for analyzing the study's research questions as it relates to the role of economic motivations for the international students at these universities and what implications this had on the decision to come study in Norway. This offers important insights at a time when Norwegian public HEIs like UiO must adapt to the new reality of charging tuition fees, a well-established practice at BI already.

4.3 Recruitment of Participants

A critical component of designing the research methodology was to establish a sampling strategy for recruiting the participants for this project. An overall purposive sampling approach was employed, in which the goal is “to sample cases/participants in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed” (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). Using purposeful sampling provided a method to source participants who could provide valuable insights for the study’s research questions about mobility motivations in the COVID-19 era and the choice of Norway as a foreign study destination. Specifically within purposive sampling, the strategy of snowball sampling was employed for this study, whereby key informants can be located through asking well-situated people to recommend individuals who could provide information-rich data relevant to the research problem topic (Patton, 2002, p. 237).

Using a snowball sampling approach, the recruitment of participants for this study occurred over several weeks in February 2023 and commenced with outreach to a peer network of international students in Oslo, which was strategically desirable to tap into as international students tend to know other international students. Identifying the parameters for the characteristics being sought in the participants for this study and clearly communicating these qualities was critical. The participant profile shared during this snowball sampling was:

- International master’s students in their second year of graduate studies at UiO or BI
- From a home country that is located outside of the EU/EEA
- Arrived in Norway in 2021 to begin their master’s program at UiO or BI

Communications were distributed via email and WhatsApp to personal contacts within the international student community in Oslo to ask for any referrals for participants that fit this profile. Additional recruitment of participants was also conducted using outreach on social media channels, specifically by reviewing LinkedIn for 2nd degree connections of international students attending BI and by posting in an international student Facebook group administered by UiO. During this process, over 20 individuals who fit the profile were initially identified and asked if they would be interested in participating in a one-on-one interview; roughly half either never responded to the request or expressed that they were not interested in taking part. However, the snowball sampling approach did ultimately yield a number of successful results; through personal recommendations from fellow international

students and a few positive responses received through social media outreach, a sample of 10 individuals were successfully sourced to serve as the participants for this study.

In determining the sample size for this research, keeping the number of interviews to a manageable amount due to time constraints was an important consideration. Beneficially, sample size in qualitative research allows for a degree of flexibility, and a helpful resource for determining what constitutes a manageable sample size came from reviewing a number of theses completed by past master's students at UiO's Faculty of Education who had also used a qualitative interview approach in their research. Based on this review, interviews with 8-12 participants seemed to be the typical range in most of these theses, which provided a useful guide for targeting how many interviews to realistically aim for. As Patton (2002) noted, the "insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected [...] than with sample size" (p. 245). Thus, conducting 10 interviews in total seemed like enough to provide an adequate amount of quality data through which to draw insights from the study's findings.

However, it is important to note that with a participant sample of this size and that was recruited using a snowball sampling approach, this study's findings will not be representative nor generalizable for the wider international student population – though both of these factors are seen as being less imperative when taking a qualitative research approach as compared to a quantitative one (Bryman, 2012, p. 188). Because the case study for this research focuses on international students who selected to enroll at two different universities in Norway, it was also essential to have an equitable representation of students from both institutions. Consequently, for the 10 international master's students who were sourced as participants, five were enrolled at BI and five were enrolled at UiO. This provided balance to the overall case study and also avoided having too few students from either institution to be able to draw any sort of sufficient findings from the interview data.

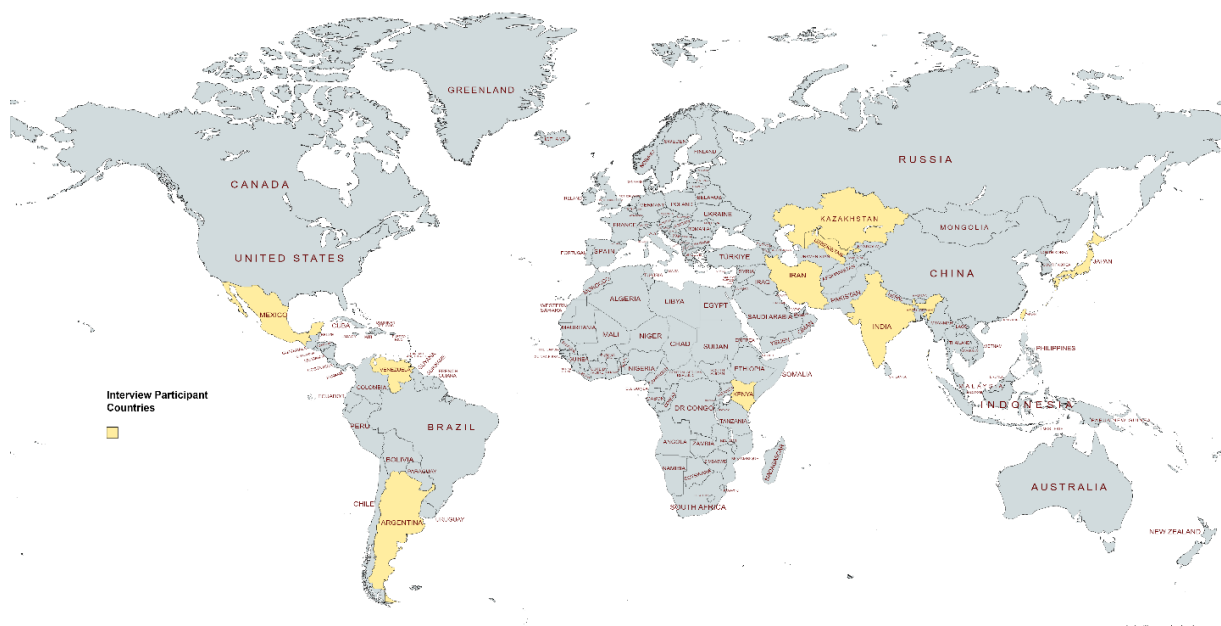
4.4 Overview of Participants

Once all the participants had been recruited, it was useful to create a full overview of their backgrounds for context. As has been previously noted, the case study was designed with an inclusive approach to incorporate the varied perspectives of international students who each came from a different non-EU/EEA country (see Figure 4.1 below).

Geographically, the 10 interview subjects hailed from home countries that spanned the globe across four continents:

- **North America:** Mexico
- **South America:** Argentina, Venezuela
- **Africa:** Kenya
- **Asia:** India, Iran, Japan, Kazakhstan, Taiwan, Uzbekistan

Figure 4.1 Map of Participants' Home Countries



By engaging participants from these 10 distinct countries in this case study, it allows for the data to be more inclusive of what the wide diversity of the international student population in Oslo and in Norway more broadly actually looks like in terms of the nationalities represented.

While field of study can be a useful characteristic to consider when conducting ISM research, in this case it was not made a focal point due to the fact that there is no overlap between the two selected HEIs in terms of the academic degree programs they offer at the master's level, as BI is a business school and UiO does not administer any business programs. Hence, when recruiting participants, it was left wide open in terms of their field of study, as long as the duration of the master's degree program was two years. The graduate programs that the 10 participants were enrolled in were generally quite varied (as shown in Table 4.1 below), though to a greater extent for those attending UiO compared to BI. This may also be

reflective of the fact that UiO offers a great many more full-time master’s program options (70+) in comparison to BI, which has 12 master’s level programs at their campus in Oslo.

Table 4.1 Participants by Student Number, University, and Academic Subject

Participant Student Number	University Attending	Home Country	Master’s Program Subject
1	BI	Japan	Strategic Marketing Management
2	BI	Kenya	Finance
3	BI	Kazakhstan	Finance
4	BI	Mexico	Business
5	BI	Uzbekistan	Finance
6	UiO	Venezuela	Public International Law
7	UiO	Argentina	Special Needs Education
8	UiO	Taiwan	International Community Health
9	UiO	Iran	Computational Science
10	UiO	India	Social Anthropology

With the participants for this study confirmed, the next step in the research methodology was establishing the process for qualitative data collection.

4.5 Data Collection Methods

When planning the individual interviews for this study, a semi-structured interviewing approach utilizing a general interview guide was adopted. In the interview guide approach, a guide is prepared with topics and questions in advance “to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed” and in addition the interviewer is “free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject” (Patton, 2002, p. 343). This allows the researcher to maintain a consistent structure across all of the interviews, while at the same time providing a degree of flexibility to further investigate any interesting insights shared by the participants in the course of the discussion by asking clarifying or follow-up questions.

Developing the interview guide was a crucial initial step for the data collection phase. As noted by Patton (2002), the interview guide “provides a framework within which the interviewer would develop questions, sequence those questions, and make decisions about

which information to pursue in greater depth” (p. 344). Both the study’s research questions and conceptual framework served as a helpful foundation in crafting the interview guide, which featured open-ended questions about motivational factors for international students as they made decisions about their foreign study plans. Open-ended questions worked well because in qualitative research you want to know how people see things – and how *they* explain them (Richards, 2015, p. 44). Therefore, providing conversational space for the participants to formulate whatever response they wish to the questions posed serves the study’s purpose of seeking to understand their perspectives on the unique motivations guiding their international mobility journeys.

The organization of the interview guide was also rooted in the conceptual framework model, as questions were designed in context with the push and pull motivational factor category types: educational, economic, political/social/cultural, and the pandemic (see Interview Guide in Appendix A). In terms of question types, the majority of the interview questions were designed as opinion and values questions; these tell the researcher about “people’s goals, intentions, desires, and expectations” (Patton, 2002, p. 350) as this corresponded to the unit of analysis for this project - international students and their motivations for mobility.

Bryman’s advice that once you have developed your initial interview questions, “reflect on them to satisfy yourself that they really do cover the range of issues that you need to address” (2012, p. 470) was helpful when working through the process of developing the interview questions. The interview guide was structured in a way to first ask some simple background questions to get the participants comfortable with the interview format, then proceeded to questions about motivations for applying to master’s degree programs abroad, and finally questions related to their motivations for choosing to come to Norway and study at BI or UiO. Crucially, there was also a final concluding question that allowed participants to add anything else that they wanted to share that had not already been covered in the course of the interview. As noted by Patton (2002), asking such a truly open-ended question allows the person being interviewed to choose whatever direction they wish and use whatever words they want to express themselves (p. 354).

Once an initial draft of the interview guide was completed, an important next step was to pilot the interview guide prior to initiating the data collection process. A pilot interview was conducted with an international student from the United States who had arrived in Norway to begin their master’s studies in 2021. There are numerous benefits to piloting an interview guide, which include: making sure the wording of questions is able to be understood by the

participants, considering how well the questions flow together, and confirming overall that the interview guide instrument functions well as a whole (Bryman, 2012, pp. 260-261). Completing this pilot interview proved to be immensely useful - the order of several questions was adjusted to improve the flow and the wording of some questions was edited to make them more clear and coherent. Additionally, one of the most significant benefits of conducting the pilot interview was a chance to gain much-needed practice with utilizing the interview guide; as described by Bryman (2012), “piloting [...] can provide interviewers with some experience of using it and can infuse them with a greater sense of confidence” (p. 260). This pilot experience provided an excellent opportunity to gain a greater degree of comfort with the process of facilitating individual interviews and with using this study’s interview guide.

The interview phase occurred between February 13th and March 2nd, 2023, and the 10 participants were given the choice of doing a virtual interview or an in-person interview, so that they could select the interview setting that they were most comfortable with. It should be noted that for virtual interviews, while there are positive aspects such as being more time efficient and removing the geographical barriers of needing to physically be present in the same space, there are also drawbacks, such as running the risk of technical problems and it potentially being more challenging to establish trust between the interviewer and interviewee (M. Elken, personal communication, August 29, 2022). Ultimately, six participants opted for a virtual interview, which took place over Zoom, and four participants preferred to meet in-person, with those meetings taking place at conference rooms located in the UiO library to ensure a private and quiet setting. All interview subjects had provided prior consent to be recorded (which is discussed further in section 4.8 on ethical considerations), and thus all the interviews were recorded using Diktafon, a smartphone app for secure encrypted sound recording that was developed by UiO. While hand-written notes were taken during each interview to capture key points and areas to ask follow-up questions about, recording the interviews using Diktafon was essential for accuracy in data collection, as having the interview recordings allows for repeated examinations of the responses provided by the interviewees and a more thorough exploration of what they said during the interview (Bryman, 2012, p. 479).

4.6 Data Analysis

With the interview data collected and recorded, the research methodology then shifted to data analysis which began with processing and coding the data. This started with the transcription process, in which the sound data recorded via Diktafon during the interviews was converted to a written transcript format. The audio files from Diktafon were transcribed using Autotekst, an automatic speech-to-text tool developed by UiO. As “the costs associated with interview transcription, in terms of time, physical, and human resources, are significant” (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006, p. 40), this was an important consideration when deciding between using Autotekst or doing manual transcription. Transcribing the data manually has the advantage of allowing the researcher to get closer to the data, whereas engaging a speech-to-text software like Autotekst has benefits in terms of efficiency, as the process of transcribing yourself can be highly time consuming (M. Elken, personal communication, August 31, 2022). After testing out the pilot interview audio file using Autotekst, the written transcription it delivered was quite satisfactory, so the decision was taken for all interview recordings to be transcribed using Autotekst software as a first step.

Once the written transcriptions were ready, a critical next piece involved reviewing the transcripts against the audio recordings word for word as an important element of quality control within the research process. F4 transcript software was utilized to accomplish this, which has the benefit of segmenting the audio file and transcription text onto one screen, as well as enabling the setup of ‘hot key’ sequences for commonly typed words within the transcript (Jones & German, 2016, pp. 348-349). This latter element proved to be very efficient for adding identifications for every instance of who was speaking, as hot key shortcuts were set up to insert labels for the interviewer and the participants across all 10 transcripts. All audio recordings were carefully listened to using the F4 software in tandem with reviewing the Autotekst transcripts to check for accuracy in the transcriptions. This allowed for the correction of any words that Autotekst had transcribed incorrectly and also to denote emotions in the text, such as indicating times when participants laughed. An intelligent verbatim transcription approach was employed throughout the process of finalizing the transcriptions in F4, where words (such as “hmm,” “umm,” “like,” etc.) are removed from the transcript if they are redundant and do not alter the meaning of what is being said (M. Elken, personal communication, August 31, 2022).

Following the process of polishing the transcripts in F4, the data coding and analysis phase commenced. The methodological approach selected for analyzing the data collected for this

study was that of thematic analysis, a method for “identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data” as a way of “analyzing the core content of interviews and observations to determine what’s significant” (Patton, 2002, p. 463). Put quite simply, it “seeks to identify common ideas from the data” (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006, p. 40). A thematic analysis approach provided a systematic way of examining the data in order to make sense of the interview transcripts and discover any interesting or noteworthy findings contained therein. The data coding process employed a mix of inductive and deductive approaches. The inductive aspect allowed for discovering patterns and themes as they emerged out of the data (Patton, 2002, p. 453), while the deductive aspect was reflected in the fact that these emergent patterns and themes would also be analyzed against the theoretical frame of student agency in educational decision-making. In this way, the concepts of student agency, motivations, and push-pull factors in decision-making for choosing an international study destination could be illuminated to highlight key findings from the interview data.

Next, a framework template was established to aid in the coding process, which began with a systematic examination of ISM research collected during the literature review phase. Seven relevant articles were identified and then thoroughly reviewed to create a comprehensive list of specific motivational factors mentioned in these studies (e.g. university rankings, tuition costs, quality of life, etc.). These factors were then further organized under the appropriate motivational categories for mobility: educational, economic, social/political/cultural, and pandemic. For efficiency purposes in this report, social/political/cultural factors will henceforth be referred to using the abbreviated term of “cultural” factors, as the majority of motivations within this category align with factors related to cultural aspects. This exercise produced a four-page long list of motivational factors that could be cross-referenced during the coding process to identify which of these factors best fit with what was being described by the participants as they shared their personal motivations for foreign study. Additionally, this list could be referenced to identify any unique motivating factors from the interview transcripts that were not among those compiled from the existing ISM literature.

Once this list was prepared, the coding framework template was then developed, which featured the four mobility motivation categories of educational, economic, cultural, and pandemic juxtaposed against the choices that the participants had to navigate in their decision-making process: the general push and pull factors for deciding to pursue a master’s degree at home vs. abroad, the factors for deciding between foreign destinations/locations for

their master's studies, and the factors for deciding between foreign HEIs for their master's studies (see Coding Framework in Appendix B). The framework utilized the concepts of push and pull factors to relate to the initial general interest in looking internationally rather than in the home country for their master's degree studies. The coding framework then transitioned to using the descriptors of pull factors and "less favorable" factors for analyzing decisions made when choosing between different foreign study locations and HEI options. This builds off the terminology of "favorable" and "unfavorable" as used by Oliveira and Soares (2016, p. 132) in their research on study abroad motivations, and thus offers a more nuanced portrayal of factors related to a destination or university abroad that were viewed as being less advantageous or beneficial once participants had progressed beyond the initial push to leave their home country.

Each transcript from this case study was then coded, and any motivational factors mentioned by the participants were cross-referenced against the list of motivational factors from the ISM literature to find the best match to name what the participant was describing; the identified factor would then be entered into the appropriate box within the coding framework. If a participant mentioned a motivating factor that was not found on the list, it was noted as a potential "new" factor and labeled as such when being added to the coding framework. This methodology was especially helpful as an approach when considering that a new fourth category of motivation type, the pandemic, had been added for this research. One article by Mok and Zhang (2022) was sourced that did reference motivational factors related to the pandemic and was thus included on the master list of motivational factors. However, there were some pandemic-related motivating factors mentioned by participants that did not fit within the existing factors on the master list, so it was important to work with the data in a way that provided flexibility to leave space in the coding framework for these "new" pandemic motivations. Overall, approaching the data in this systematic manner enabled a thematic analysis of the data to seek patterns in the motivational factors (similarities, differences, etc.) as well as any new factors that appeared in the transcripts.

In addition to using this framework document to code manually, NVivo qualitative data analysis software was also employed as part of this study's coding and analysis process. The benefit of using NVivo in addition to manual coding was, as noted by Bryman (2012), that it can assist with making administrative tasks related to the retrieval of data faster and easier (p. 617) which was desirable for a couple particular aspects where manual coding would have been highly time consuming. First, by reviewing the data with NVivo, it was a more efficient

way to highlight notable quotes from the transcripts that were pertinent to revisit and potentially consider for inclusion when presenting the findings in the thesis report. Second, as described by Eder et al. (2010) when conducting a qualitative analysis, “one needs to consider the importance ascribed by the respondent as well as the number of mentions” (p. 246). In reviewing the copious amount of data collected over the course of 10 interviews, it was important to be able to track the frequency of mentions for specific motivational factors, and NVivo offered an efficient mechanism to do exactly that. Mutually employing manual coding and computer-assisted coding with NVivo into the methodology for this study was an effective strategy, as it drew upon the strengths of both approaches for analyzing the data.

4.7 Research Validity

When conducting a qualitative study, the goals of the researcher regarding validity are “to establish that your account of the data is valid (well founded and sound) and that your methods as a researcher were reliable (that the audience can trust that you have used thorough and consistent methods to produce a trustworthy outcome)” (Richards, 2015, pp. 214-215). In order to achieve these goals and practice sound qualitative research, it was important that validity be kept top of mind along every step in the research process. Notes were kept recording details about what actions were taken and why throughout the research design, collection, and analysis phases for this project. A similarly relevant component for conducting excellent qualitative research is that of “rich rigor,” which refers to how a study should employ “sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex theoretical constructs” in relation to the sample, context, and data collection and analysis processes; furthermore, such rigor “also conveniently provides face validity” (Tracy, 2010, pp. 840-841). By definition, face validity concerns whether at face value a research study appears to be both appropriate and reasonable (Golafshani, 2003, p. 602). By taking care during the research process and thoroughly explaining in this report the rationales behind the choices made in developing this case study, this serves the objective of demonstrating face validity by detailing how the methodological choices made for this thesis were practical, purposeful, and suitable.

Additional means, methods, and practices can be used by the researcher to achieve quality and demonstrate validity in qualitative research. “Sincerity” is another criterion of excellence identified by Tracy (2010), specifically in terms of being honest about biases in the research (p. 841). In this study, an evident bias is that of researcher bias, which is important to

recognize as it “alerts you to the fact that you yourself are part of what you are studying” (Richards, 2015, p. 53). In being a member of the same group that is being researched, that undoubtedly colors the approaches taken in this study, whether consciously or unconsciously. Practicing self-reflexivity in recognizing these personal biases and being honest in identifying this researcher bias for the audience is thus important for providing a sense of transparency in this reporting (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). Thus, it was shared in section 4.2 when describing the selection and design for this study, that as a fellow non-EU/EEA international master’s student in Norway there exists a personal connection between the researcher and the population of students in this case, an important fact to highlight for the audience.

Finally, “credibility” is an additional quality criterion noted by Tracy (2010) that can help support research validity, which relates to the trustworthiness and plausibility of the research findings (p. 842). One of the most vital practices that the qualitative researcher can employ to achieve credibility is that of thick description, which involves providing a rich level of detail for the context and case in the reporting from start to finish. Thick description in reporting means that rather than writing in a way that tells the audience what to think, the writing should be crafted in a manner that brings the audience in and shows them in detail what is happening, so that the researcher lets the audience come to their own determinations about what is occurring and what that ultimately means (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). In the upcoming sections of the report, the findings and the discussion of the data are presented in a manner that strives for this “show rather than tell approach” to foster credibility in this thesis research for the audience.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

When conducting any kind of research, it is critical for ethical considerations to be regarded as a top priority when making all decisions and especially when planning a research design that involves interviewing individuals. For this qualitative study, procedural ethics served as a strict guiding principle from the outset, which are defined as “ethical actions dictated as universally necessary by larger organizations, institutions or governing bodies” (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). Two institutions guided the procedural ethics for this project: UiO and Sikt (The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research). Because this case study involved collecting personal data from the participants during the interviews, all associated regulations from UiO and Sikt had to be adhered to. In order to ensure that these standards

would be met, a notification form for the processing of personal data was submitted to Sikt in January 2023, with approval from Sikt received in February 2023 prior to commencing any interviews. This notification form outlined the research design for the project, the kinds of personal data that would be collected, how it would be collected and processed, and included a copy of the interview guide and a participant information letter. The procedural ethics from UiO also helped dictate the management of the data that was collected during the study, so that it was handled in a responsible and secure way in accordance with UiO's data management policies. For instance, all the virtual interviews were conducted using an official UiO Zoom account rather than a personal Zoom account as per UiO guidelines.

Another essential ethical element noted by Tracy (2010) is that “research participants have a right to know the nature and potential consequences of the research—and understand that their participation is voluntary” (p. 847). When reaching out to recruit potential participants, before agreeing to be interviewed they were provided via email with a participant information letter and consent form for their review (see Participant Information Letter and Consent Form in Appendix C). Gaining informed and voluntary consent prior to the interview involves explaining for what purpose the information is being collected, who the information is for, how will it be used, what will be asked in the interview, how the data will be handled, whether there will be confidentiality involved, as well as what risks might be involved in being interviewed (Patton, 2002, p. 407). All 10 interview subjects gave approval by signing the consent form to participate and to have their interview be recorded. Additionally, all participants were informed that the study had received approval from Sikt and were also provided with a copy of the interview guide questions in advance of the interview day so that they could review them ahead of time and raise any questions or concerns. Before beginning each interview, the participants were asked verbally if they consented to being recorded as an additional re-confirmation to ensure that they were still comfortable with proceeding.

It was also communicated to every participant at the start of the interview that their name would not be used in order to impart confidentiality and anonymity, such as using pseudonyms in transcripts and beyond (Bryman, 2012, p. 142). To help provide anonymity, each participant has been assigned a student number from 1-10 (see Table 4.1), which has been utilized in this report when describing the details they shared during the course of their interviews. In addition, the students' home country and whether they attend BI or UiO is mentioned in the report only when it is relevant to the point being discussed. The actions described in this section were all ethically necessary to ensure participants fully understood

and were comfortable with what they were signing up for, were doing so voluntarily, and were aware that the information they shared would be treated with the utmost confidentiality.

4.9 Research Limitations

In conducting research, particularly as a master's student, one is making the best decisions they can based on the information and resources that they have available at that time. It is imperative to acknowledge that in designing and implementing this study, certain limitations exist and to be transparent about these methodological shortcomings to the audience. One is that due to time and other resource constraints, this case study is small in terms of its sample size, having just 10 interview subjects. As noted by Eder et al. (2010) having a limited number of participants “exchanges depth from a few respondents for a larger number of responses” (p. 247), which makes it difficult to be able to draw any conclusions from this research that could be applied to the wider international student population in Norway in the same way that a more expansive quantitative study might. Also, the study for this thesis focused on only two HEIs, which further limits the chance of generalizability of the findings as they are biased (Eder et al, 2010, p. 248), in this case towards the decision to study at BI or UiO. Therefore, when discussing the data findings in this report, it is possible to highlight interesting ideas and trends captured in this study, but not to draw any sweeping or comprehensive conclusions about ISM more widely. Finally, as a novice researcher, a lack of experience with interviewing also put limitations on this project. Reflecting on the interview transcripts, there were certainly missed opportunities for asking follow-up questions and drawing out more details from these students that could have contributed additional valuable insights about motivations for ISM in this thesis.

5. Analysis of Findings

Having established the research methodology behind this case study, the key findings gathered from analyzing the participant interview data will now be presented. This data aligns with four categories of motivational factors for mobility: educational, economic, social/political/cultural, and pandemic. To simplify the presentation and discussion of the findings, the third category will henceforth be referred to as “cultural” factors, as most of the motivations within this category were cultural-related. The findings are organized by the different points in the decision-making journey: the general push and general pull factors behind the student deciding not to study in their home country and instead pursue their graduate degree abroad, then navigating decisions based on less favorable factors and pull factors for international study destinations/locations and for foreign HEIs. The section begins with an overview of the backgrounds of the 10 participants to provide context about their previous histories with foreign travel and mobility before arriving in Norway as international students.

5.1 Travel Snapshots: An Overview of Participants’ Prior International Experiences

At the start of the interviews, students were asked to outline their previous experiences going abroad prior to coming to Norway in 2021 and the nature of this travel, whether for academic purposes, professional opportunities, volunteering, personal holidays/vacations, etc. (see Participant Prior International Experiences in Appendix D). Of the 10 participants, all had traveled outside of their home country before, typically on multiple occasions and for reasons that included academic or work purposes as well as vacations. However, there was a participant who had left her home country of Iran only once before, at the age of 12 on a family holiday to Europe. Nonetheless, this lone international experience was quite a significant one for her:

“We saved up our money and we just went to one very cool trip [laughing]. I was very young, but I remember it left a very nice impression on me.” (Student 9)

Just over half of the students had engaged in prior international academic experiences before at the HE level, at various locations in Europe, Asia, and North America. Most had taken part in short-term academic exchange programs lasting for one or two semesters during their undergraduate studies. However, a couple had already engaged in full degree mobility before

coming to Norway for their graduate studies: one had completed a bachelor's degree at a university in South Korea and another had done a first master's degree in the United Kingdom. Participants were also asked if they had ever been to Norway prior to beginning their graduate program in Oslo in 2021 - and there was an even split, as half had visited Norway and half had never been to the country. Of those who had been to Norway, most had visited for vacations or work trips, though one person had come for a semester abroad as an undergraduate. Students were then asked if they felt there was any connection between having engaged in previous international experiences and their interest in pursuing a master's degree abroad. The vast majority responded in the affirmative, while one student replied maybe and one answered no. The discussion section of this report will address the links between the international students interviewed in this study, their prior experiences abroad, and the concept of mobility capital presented in the literature review.

5.2 The Impulse to Leave: General Push Factors for Students Choosing Not to Study in their Home Country

The first step in the international mobility journey for these students was making the initial decision to leave their home country for their degrees; therefore, what were the motivations behind this choice not to engage in postgraduate HE in their home country? To probe this question, each person was asked if they had applied to master's programs at any universities located in their home country and to elaborate as to why or why not. Notably, only one participant in this case study applied to a university within their home country (Iran). Overall, the motivations that pushed students away from pursuing graduate degrees in their home country were most strongly led by cultural factors, though examples from the other factor categories were also mentioned.

The "quality of education" in the home country was noted by several students as an educational push motivation, believing that the overall quality offered by the nation's HEIs did not meet their personal expectations or standards.

"I didn't really like this education level in Uzbekistan...I was not satisfied with that."
(Student 5)

“I graduated from the private university, which is considered one of the best universities in Kazakhstan. So I did my maximum possible in Kazakhstan...I wanted better options.”

(Student 3)

Economic motivations were also cited as a general push factor by a handful of students, specifically that of the “tuition fees” in the home country. Several shared how tuition costs locally were relatively similar to, or in some cases even more costly than, the foreign universities that they ended up choosing to apply to, such as BI and UiO.

“My hometown university in Mexico is kind of the same price - and it's in Mexico.” (Student 4)

“Economic strength” was another motivating push factor shared by students from Venezuela and Iran respectively, as precarious economic situations in both countries made it challenging to plan financially for studying at local universities.

Cultural motivations were the most widely discussed type of general push factors referenced as to why they did not want to study for a master’s degree in their home country. “Quality of life” was a factor shared by several participants as a driver in their wanting to leave.

“I couldn't imagine myself living in Japan anymore...so I decided to go to a country that had a bit more work-life balance.” (Student 1)

“Academic freedom,” or markedly a perceived lack thereof within the culture of the home country, was also cited by a couple of students from Asia as a factor that pushed them to want to go abroad for their master’s degrees.

“Academic environment there is kind of...more like the professor tells me what to do, and I just follow his advice. So I think it's less free.” (Student 8)

“Because the major political party in power is right-wing, one of the ways that they are sort of asserting their power in cultural academic life is by cracking down on liberal progressive social science disciplines and places of thought. And so at this point, it's very difficult to study or speak about things that you want to study openly.” (Student 10)

Additionally, “political instability” in the home country was noted as a push factor by a few students - one referencing the serious refugee crisis happening at home and another describing the frustration she felt in pursuing her future goals due to the lack of stability in her country.

“I really was deprived from being able to make a plan and stick to that plan and not some outside influence raining on that plan.” (Student 9)

Lastly, as the students in this case study had to navigate their mobility decisions during 2020 and 2021 within the context of the chaotic early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were asked about their feelings of the pandemic as a motivator while applying for graduate programs abroad at that time. In terms of generally wanting to leave their home country, a new pandemic push factor identified from the data was “frustrations from being stuck in the home country during the pandemic,” which was brought up by a handful of participants.

“I don't know if I thought so much about the pandemic situation consciously, like maybe it was, I don't know, a way to get [a] change of atmosphere.” (Student 7)

“At that point of time, I also wanted to get out of the country because it felt like I needed to. It was getting quite suffocating.” (Student 10)

Another new pandemic push factor for going abroad generally was a “resistance to the pandemic further delaying study plans.” With the pandemic being an ever-changing situation that had yet to improve in late 2020, a couple participants talked about how at the time they sought to make forward progress on their plans to get out of their home country for their graduate studies.

“If I passed up this opportunity, I would have to wait another year and...it still probably would be uncertain a year from now.” (Student 1)

5.3 Attracted Abroad: General Pull Factors for Students Wanting to Study Internationally

Following the decision not to study in their home country, these individuals were now in pursuit of becoming an international master's student. The pull to go abroad was quite strong, as all but one participant applied exclusively to foreign HEIs for their graduate degrees.

When considering this attraction to study internationally, pull factors identified from the interview data helped illuminate general motivations in pursuing a degree abroad that were not tied to any particular foreign countries or universities. Once again, these were led by cultural factors, with educational and pandemic-related factors also having some significance as general pull factors. The most referenced general educational pull factor was that of the

“willingness to study abroad,” with several students sharing that studying internationally had been a long-held objective for some time.

“I thought it would be very interesting and a very good experience. I was a bit scared, but [laughing] it was always a dream of mine to study abroad.” (Student 7)

With the most widely discussed pull factors for pursuing international study in general being driven by cultural motivations, “quality of life” was a factor cited by a handful of people who felt other countries would have better offerings in terms of aspects like a good work-life balance and a high standard of living. Nearly half of the participants also mentioned “experience different cultures and broaden horizons” as another culturally relevant pull behind their wanting to study in a new country. A student who had completed a semester abroad in France as an undergraduate shared how this experience had sparked within her a desire to engage in further immersion with European culture.

“I think the experience that I had with the exchange made me decide to pursue a master's degree abroad because the exchange was only four or five months. So it was not enough for me. I remember telling myself, I'm going to come back to Europe.” (Student 4)

Interestingly, one participant also cited “immigration policy” as being a general cultural pull motivation for her. She had seen how difficult it was for Iranians to get visas for tourism or work purposes to visit other countries, but believed that students are able to get visas more easily - so the international student route would offer her the best opportunity to be able to go abroad.

Additionally, two pandemic-related motivations were gleaned from the data that corresponded to general pull factors for international study. First, experiencing an “exciting place to live” was a strong motivator for a student who was desperately craving that excitement after enduring months of pandemic lockdown at home.

“One of the good things about starting a new program is you also get to explore a new place. And after COVID, it's something I really, really desperately needed. So I was really looking forward to it.” (Student 10)

Second, “pandemic experiences shaping study plans” was a pull factor for one student who was working in the healthcare field during the pandemic. This student shared that he was driven to find an international program in public health based on his first-hand experiences of

working on the frontlines during the pandemic and wanted to use a master's degree abroad to transition his career path from medicine to public health.

"I was working in a hospital in Taiwan...and yeah, I think that kind of makes me feel like doing public health is the perfect timing." (Student 8)

5.4 Contemplating a Destination's Disadvantages: Less Favorable Factors when Navigating Potential International Study Locations

As push factor is a term appropriate in ISM research to describe the initial push stage driving the student away from their home country. However, a different terminology is helpful to better represent the subsequent stages of decision-making, in relation to how students navigated choices of international study destinations and universities because of aspects associated with a location or institution that they perceived as being less attractive. Therefore, the term "less favorable" has been utilized in this research to refer to motivational factors during the student's decision-making journey that led them to be concerned about, or possibly outright reject, potential international study location or HEI options. Once students had settled on the decision to seek postgraduate opportunities abroad, they next had to weigh up their foreign study possibilities and recognize the characteristics they did not find appealing in order to narrow down their options during the application phase. At this stage of decision-making, economic and cultural motivations were the most well-represented within the data as less favorable factors, as were pandemic factors to an extent.

Economic motivations seemed to take on a much more leading role in decision-making once students had decided to pursue a master's degree abroad and now had to think about the financial implications of where to study. Nearly everyone mentioned "tuition fees" as a major driver that led them to remove certain countries from consideration, with the United Kingdom and the United States being noted specifically by multiple individuals as being undesirable because of the high tuition costs in both places.

"My first choice was to study in the UK and the cost of a master's was crazy." (Student 2)

"I listed out U.S. at first because it was very expensive...I was like, okay, it's just out of the list. I'm not going to apply." (Student 5)

Another economic factor, "cost of living," was also a drawback for certain locations according to some of the study's participants. Even though the students in this case study all

ultimately selected Norway as their foreign study destination, the country's notoriously high cost of living was cited by nearly half as a factor they found unappealing about the country.

Numerous cultural factors were identified from the interview data in relation to students looking less favorably on particular international study locations. "Climate and weather" and "social friendliness" were two factors that participants had perceived about Norway in a less than favorable way. In relation to the former, the country's cold temperatures and the darkness/lack of sunlight in winter were cited as harsh conditions that students were not keen about. In terms of "social friendliness," a few participants were also worried about whether as outsiders they would be able to build social connections with people in Norway.

"I had heard...people are not as warm or friendly, that they can be quite reserved in Norway. I was concerned - would I have a sense of community here?" (Student 10)

Perhaps the most prominent less favorable cultural factor was that of "linguistic isolation," where a lack of language proficiency impacts the student by making them feel less comfortable in relocating to a foreign country (Shkoler & Rabenu, 2022, p. 7). In fact, over half discussed how such language barriers led them to view certain countries as less appealing options when deciding between potential foreign study destinations.

"I kind of stayed away from France...those countries like France, Italy, Spain. I knew it was going to be more important for me to know the language." (Student 9)

Finally, several factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic had some interesting impacts on student motivations as they considered foreign locales for pursuing their master's degrees. As many countries, including Norway, had travel restrictions in place in 2020 and 2021 that barred entry for international students, several people noted that "not being able to attend in-person classes abroad" was a less favorable pandemic-related factor they had thought about.

"It was uncertain, especially with regards to Norway, because they did have a no entry policy for the longest time. So yeah, I was quite nervous about it...you don't know what's going to happen." (Student 10)

The "challenges of adhering to pandemic regulations at potential study destinations" was another less favorable factor raised by a participant who was concerned about how the COVID-19 regulations at the time were much more stringent in countries like Norway compared to the protocols she was used to in her home country.

“Coming from where I'm coming from, yes, we did have restrictions, but they were not restrictions like they are here. I think I felt a lot of anxiety because moving here, I'd have to abide by the law. That really worried me.” (Student 2)

One other interesting pandemic motivation that was perceived less favorably related to the freedom of back-and-forth movement between an international study destination and the home country. This factor, “difficulties with travel restrictions and quarantine,” was expressed by a couple of students as something that weighed on them when decision-making for their mobility journeys. Amidst the uncertainty of the pandemic, they had to navigate possible worst-case scenarios in their minds when thinking about foreign study locations.

“I also thought about how difficult it would be...to leave the country and come back...so I definitely thought I probably wouldn't be able to go back if something happened to my family.” (Student 1)

5.5 Contemplating a Destination’s Advantages: Pull Factors when Navigating Potential International Study Locations and Deciding on Norway

Gradually narrowing down their options as they considered where and where not to pursue their graduate degrees abroad, the more attractive factors associated with specific destinations pulled students towards certain countries - before ultimately leading to a decision to come to Norway. In the overall pull motivations towards international study locations, educational and pandemic factors occupied a less prominent position in comparison to economic and cultural factors. However, a couple of students did note that they were attracted by the overall perceptions of a country’s “quality of education” as an aspect that made them look more positively at certain places, with Norway being one such academically appealing locale.

“I always thought that education in the Scandinavian countries was very developed...and so that was why I thought of Norway, because in the education section, they were very progressive.” (Student 7)

Economic pull factors were significant in participant motivations to focus on particular locations for pursuing a master’s degree abroad. “Tuition fees” was a key economic factor considered by a number of participants during the application process and why Norway, which offered tuition-free study at its public universities at the time, was viewed as a highly attractive option.

“The biggest advantage that Norway had was being offered free of charge.” (Student 6)

Employment was another noteworthy economic pull factor that was mentioned as something that appealed when choosing foreign locales for their master’s degrees. “Employment opportunities during study” was a pull motivator for a number of people who strategically sought countries that allowed international students to work part-time as a means to help fund themselves while completing their graduate studies. “Employment opportunities after study” was also an important factor, as individuals thought about the longer-term implications of their choice of foreign study destination and what this could mean for their careers after completing their master’s programs.

“When you're applying, the job opportunities afterwards...especially if you're from outside of EU, you kind of have to consider that. EU has this kind of nice connection within all of the places and that's also very important - the job prospect, job market afterwards.” (Student 9)

At this stage, there were an abundance of cultural factors attracting students to particular international study locations. A cultural pull factor that many students found desirable in the study destinations they pursued was a country’s “quality of life.” Places like Canada and Norway were viewed as having a good work-life balance which was appreciated by some who were also seeking a slower pace of life. Another pull factor that several students mentioned was the “scenery and natural environment” as part of the cultural appeal of coming to Norway. Oslo was an attractive location in this regard, as they liked how one could enjoy both city life and the close proximity to be able to get out into nature easily. During the interviews, many students talked about “language factor” as being an essential cultural motivation, describing a pull toward foreign destinations where English was widely spoken.

“I went to this study fair - the woman told me you don't need to worry. You will be able to communicate because like 99% of people speak English in Norway.” (Student 4)

Finally, “knowledge of the host country” was a notable cultural pull factor mentioned by a few students during their interviews, as they applied for graduate studies in countries they had a previous personal history with. One student applied to graduate programs at several universities in France as she had completed a semester exchange in the country during her bachelor’s and was very interested in returning and spending more time there. Another student had similarly done a semester abroad in Norway as an undergraduate – at BI, in fact. For this participant, the pull for Norway was so strong that it was the only place she ever

considered as a destination for her master's degree, related to both her familiarity with the country and the positive experiences she had during her earlier studies there.

"Because I've been there already...Norway was the only choice." (Student 3)

While navigating these international mobility choices, the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic was raging all around them. Amidst this complexity, a couple interesting new pull factors were identified where the pandemic played a role in influencing some people's decisions about foreign study destinations. First, the pandemic pull factor of "COVID-19 thwarting other plans made applying to an international masters in Norway more attractive" was an aspect that a participant studying anthropology discussed at length during the course of her interview. In early 2020, she had enthusiastically accepted a professional opportunity in Africa, which ended up getting cancelled because of the pandemic – and this resulted in her needing to fully re-evaluate her future plans. Accordingly, the motivation for pursuing a master's degree in Norway was one this student believed she would not have pursued had her original plans to work abroad not been cancelled as a result of these pandemic circumstances beyond her control.

"Before the pandemic, I didn't really think about applying for the master's in Norway, to be honest...the pandemic sort of amplified it. Had it not been for the pandemic, I probably would have either been in Nairobi or I would have been at home working full-time." (Student 10)

A second and more widely observed pandemic destination pull factor was the "belief that Norway would allow entry for international students during the pandemic," which was expressed by almost half of the participants. Many countries, including Norway, had highly restrictive entry bans for foreigners in place during the early months of 2021 when these students made the choice of Norway as the location where they would pursue their graduate studies.

"Norway was closed for everyone...there is a chance that they might open the borders because they did it last year. So I was like, okay, this is promising. And then last year was in 2019, 2020, a worse situation. So now vaccination is there. So I was like, okay, maybe the chance that they open the borders is higher." (Student 3)

“My gut instinct was - I think it's going to work out. OK, maximum, the worst-case scenario, it might be a little later than I had anticipated. But I had this faith that, OK, I think I will be in Norway this year at least.” (Student 10)

This belief did indeed come to fruition, as the Norwegian government announced in early July 2021 that international students could travel to Norway from August 1st to begin the autumn semester in-person later that month (Ministry of Education and Research, 2 July 2021).

5.6 Campus Concerns: Less Favorable Factors when Navigating Decisions about Higher Education Institutions

Another vital component of the decision-making journey for these students involved reflecting on the features of the HEIs abroad that they were considering. Participants were asked to discuss their perspectives about the pull factors and the less favorable factors related to navigating choices about foreign universities. In general, the less favorable factors revealed when analyzing the interview data aligned with educational, economic, and pandemic factor motivations being the most dominant, whereas cultural factors were not as significant for making choices about international HEIs.

When asked about the educational motivations shaping the foreign institutions they were considering for their graduate degrees, a number of people cited the importance of “university rankings.” Students mentioned consulting university ranking lists, such as the FT Business School Rankings and QS World University Rankings, as a means for them to gain some perspective about a foreign university’s global reputation.

“That was the only implication I had of how good the university is - through the rankings, where they stand, what they do and how connected they are with the rest of the world.” (Student 9)

Consequently, “university rankings” sometimes functioned as a less favorable factor, working against institutions in the decision-making process. Several students shared there was a connection between their rejection of certain universities and their view of the institution’s placement in the global rankings being seen as less than satisfactory.

“I checked the quality of the school and I saw that University of Canada West was not on the good rankings. Okay, I'm not a fan of it. I don't want to go there.” (Student 5)

A related less favorable factor for HEIs abroad was the “quality of education,” which a participant noted was a highly important factor in deciding where to enroll. Having received admission offers from UiO and Stockholm University, one reason that she viewed Stockholm as the less attractive option was her perception that the educational quality level there was no longer as strong as it had once been.

“Stockholm...the program is pretty good...I mean, it's not a bad department. It used to be a really good department, but I think they just kind of fell down the ladder for a couple of years.” (Student 10)

Furthermore, a new less favorable educational factor uncovered from the data was that of “program duration,” which here relates to the length of the academic program at a university being viewed as a disadvantage when weighing up master’s program options. Specifically, “program duration” was a key motivator for a student who was deciding between attending UiO and Karolinska Institute in Sweden. The duration of Karolinska’s public health master’s was an unattractive aspect for this student, who worried that the quick pace of its one-year program might feel overwhelming, whereas UiO offered a two-year public health master’s program, which felt more manageable to him.

Along with these educational motivations, economic factors also played a vital role for students when making decisions about foreign tertiary education institution options. Three less favorable factors in particular that were noteworthy from the interview data were “tuition fees,” “ability to pay tuition,” and “ability to obtain funding.” Regarding “tuition fees,” a few students mentioned that while they had also been accepted to universities in Canada, France, and Sweden among others, the fact that tuition fees were high at the institutions there diminished their appeal. In addition, “ability to pay tuition” was also a less favorable factor for a couple of students who were admitted to universities they would have liked to attend, but they were unable to cover the required tuition costs. One student shared her disappointment in being accepted to one of her top choice schools, The University of Amsterdam, but not being able to afford it.

“Netherlands - is one of the best places you could go to. It's so expensive. I have to decline this because I simply can't pay 28 000 euros no matter what I do.” (Student 9)

In terms of “ability to obtain funding,” this was an adverse factor for several students who were not successful in obtaining scholarships from universities they had been admitted to in Canada, France, and the Netherlands respectively. This inability to obtain funding contributed

to the decisions not to proceed with these universities, as the students recognized that they would struggle financially to cover the tuition costs without the support of scholarship money.

Pandemic factors also impacted the ways in which students contemplated their foreign HEI options, and a new less favorable pandemic-related factor extracted from the data was “online-only classes not seen as an acceptable option.” This was raised by a number of students, who felt that universities offering online classes only for the autumn 2021 semester was undesirable for multiple reasons. These included practical challenges, such as the considerable time difference between their home country and Norway and unreliable internet connection in the home country, as well as disappointment about missing out on the in-person experiences of studying at a foreign university. Additionally, some also cited difficulties they had previously encountered in online learning environments - for instance, being unable to meaningfully connect with their classmates digitally or feeling uncomfortable communicating with professors through a computer screen.

“To study online...I didn't want that for myself because I decided to go abroad to have the real experience.” (Student 4)

“I do not like online classes. I cannot ask a question and I don't feel [it's] interactive.”
(Student 5)

5.7 University Attraction: Pull Factors for Applying to and Enrolling at BI and UiO

For these students, their international mobility journeys resulted in them feeling most pulled to BI or UiO for their graduate degrees. The factors that attracted participants to choose these two HEIs in Norway can be attributed to motivations found across all factor categories, with educational and economic factors being the predominant pulls and cultural and pandemic being less so. Additionally, some characteristics that appealed to these students were tied to factors that pertained to both universities, while some were distinctive to BI or to UiO.

In deciding to apply to and enroll at BI or UiO, educational pull factors were deeply significant for all the participants. “University rankings” factored in favor of both BI and UiO for many of the students, who were impressed by these two institutions’ positions within global university ranking lists. For one individual who was deciding between two schools in

Norway (NMBU and UiO), consulting “university rankings” highlighted an important distinction for him as he considered the reputation and presence of these two institutions on the wider global stage, where UiO then became the clear front-runner.

“I was looking at different international rankings, and the only university [in Norway] besides University of Bergen that was in the international radar was UiO.” (Student 6)

Moreover, a couple participants in this study mentioned two interesting and interconnected educational pull factors in their decision to apply to BI – an “easy admission process” because of “strategic alliances with home partners” – in this case, the undergraduate universities they had attended in their home countries. Benefitting from these strategic university partnerships, the application process was made easier for these students, as they were able to secure exemptions from having to submit GMAT exam results when applying to BI. Having the opportunity to avoid the time and financial costs associated with having to study for and take the GMAT exam was a very positive motivation both cited in their respective decisions to apply to BI.

“BI has a strong relationship with my university in Mexico, so I asked for a waiver for the GMAT...so it was pretty straightforward, the application.” (Student 4)

Programmatically, a handful of students from both institutions cited the “curriculum” as a substantial educational pull factor, as they thoroughly researched the content of the master’s programs they were interested in when applying and following their acceptances to BI or UiO.

“I spent a lot of time just trying to understand their [BI’s] programs and how in-depth they go into topics that I’m interested in.” (Student 2)

“UIO is a comprehensive university...I think it would be nice if I can take some courses outside of school of medicine.” (Student 8)

Another educational-related pull was that of “program specialization,” which was noted by multiple students across both universities. There were specific elements to the master’s programs within their chosen fields of study at BI and UiO which they felt provided something unique that they could not find at other tertiary education institutions.

“This LLM in public international law - not international law, but public international law - is quite rare.” (Student 6)

In addition to the weight given to educational factors, nearly all noted that economic factors motivated their choice of which foreign university to attend. One outlier was a student from BI whose father was fully paying for her master's degree and shared that she therefore never thought about any financial aspects during the application and selection process. Nonetheless, there were some unique findings to the economic motivations amongst the students by institution. The factor of "tuition fees" loomed large as a pull factor for those from UiO, who applied to start their studies in 2021 when all degree-seeking international students could undertake their studies there without paying any tuition costs.

"I applied - one of the biggest reasons was that it was free and you didn't have to pay tuition. Because if I had to pay for it, then I would have to take out a loan, which I did not want to do [laughing]." (Student 10)

The motivation of "ability to obtain funding" was a prominent pull amongst some of the students from BI, a private university that charges tuition. Notably, several participants from BI in this case study were able to secure full scholarships: one from her employer and two being awarded BI Presidential Scholarships. Knowing their master's degrees would be fully funded had a major impact on each of these students' motivations to attend BI.

"I was not sure if I would be coming or not before that...and when I got the scholarship letter, I was like, okay, the decision is made. It is too good opportunity to miss." (Student 5)

Another key economic pull factor when choosing HEIs abroad was "employment opportunities after study," which was noted by both those from BI and UiO. For one student, she discussed being willing to pay the tuition costs at BI because she viewed it as a good investment towards her future objective of securing a job in Norway after graduation.

"My goal was to find a job here. So looking at it from that perspective, I focused mainly on what school would be the safe bet for me to get a job." (Student 1)

Similarly, another student planning to stay in Norway permanently was more attracted to UiO after seeking advice from a few Norwegians, who advised him that the strong national reputation of the university would serve him well for his career prospects in the country.

"If you are willing to stay in Norway afterwards, it will be definitely better to have a degree from UiO than from other university here because it will make you more competitive whilst you are looking for jobs." (Student 6)

While participants in this study largely did not consider cultural factors as great of a pull as educational and economic factors in their choice of these two universities, a few students from BI did reflect on being attracted to its campus culture. Specifically, the factor of “university staff were responsive and helpful to student enquiries” created a very positive perception of BI during the application phase, with one student even describing BI’s communications as “flawless.”

“The whole system at BI, with the chat, it’s very well organized. I think that was really helpful for me during the whole application. You just go into the chat box, and you ask people and they give you answers immediately.” (Student 5)

Finally, while pandemic factors were also not as widely impactful as educational or economic ones regarding participants’ attraction to BI and UiO, there were two interesting pandemic-related pull factors unearthed from the interview data. First, the factor of “online-only classes seen as an acceptable option” was expressed by several students, who found BI and UiO to be desirable institutions even if they were not going to offer any in-person learning in 2021 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I wasn’t stressed about it... we will be studying online, that didn’t really change anything.” (Student 5)

A second intriguing new pandemic-related pull factor was “COVID-19 uncertainty could benefit admission chances,” which came from a participant discussing his outlook in late 2020 when applying to UiO, his top choice university. He saw the ambiguity of the pandemic times as offering an opportune moment for him to apply for UiO’s LLM in public international law, a competitive program that accepts only around 25 students each year. In addition, he felt that the prospect of UiO’s studies potentially being fully online for the autumn 2021 semester could also work in favor of his admission chances, as he believed it might cause potential applicants who weren’t keen to study online to hold off and wait to apply the following year instead.

“I actually remember thinking this might be a good year to apply...this is actually a good chance because I think majority of people will not be applying this year because everything is so uncertain. Putting all of that together, I remember thinking...this is probably the highest chance I will get to get into the program that I want.” (Student 6)

5.8 Participant Perspectives: Self-Ranking of Motivational Factors by Significance

This section of the report has demonstrated some of the most noteworthy findings that were discovered through analyzing the interview data. The students reflected on their entire decision-making journeys: from the initial push to not pursue a graduate degree in their home country, to being pulled to pursue their studies abroad, to navigating the application and selection process as they considered the motivational factors impacting their choices about international study destinations and HEI options, and then finally deciding to come to Norway and attend BI or UiO. As a main component of this project explores what motivational factors were most significant during the students' decision-making process for international mobility, participants were asked during the interviews to self-rank their own motivations from most to least significant using the study's categories of educational, economic, cultural, and pandemic factors. The majority of individuals ranked educational or economic factors as being the most important to them overall, with cultural and pandemic factors being less central in their decision-making. One outlier was Student 3 who ranked cultural motivations the highest and economic motivations the lowest; however, this was also the only participant in the study who had a family member funding her master's degree, which may explain why she prioritized her motivations differently from the others. The next section of this report provides a deeper discourse to reflect on some of the study's notable findings.

6. Discussion

Having highlighted some of the main discoveries from analyzing the data in this case, the findings will next be further illuminated in a discussion that offers new perspectives about the key foundational components of this thesis: the study's two research questions and the conceptual framework of student agency in decision-making.

6.1 Going Abroad Again: The Influence of Mobility Capital

It is valuable to begin this discussion by first reflecting on the contextual elements of this case study in terms of the backgrounds of the participants prior to their ISM journeys to Norway in 2021. Every participant in the case study had at least one (and in nearly all cases, multiple) opportunities to travel outside of their home countries before. A relevant finding from the data was that the vast majority of students held the belief that these prior international experiences did have some influence on their decision to pursue their master's degree in a foreign country - regardless of the purpose of their previous travels abroad or whether these experiences were short or long in duration. This corresponds with existing research on mobility capital, such as the assertion of Brooks and Waters (2011) of there being a tendency for internationally mobile students to have a greater personal history with travel abroad. Also, in choosing the route of going to a different country for full degree mobility at the graduate level, over half of the participants were building on existing mobility capital they had already acquired, having previously undertaken academic experiences outside of their home country for one semester or more.

6.2 What Motivations Mattered: Research Question One

This discussion of international student motivations when making mobility decisions now seeks to address the first research question that has been posed in this thesis.

RQ1: For international master's students, what motivational factors were most significant when applying for degree programs abroad during a global pandemic?

When participants were asked to rank the four distinct motivational factor categories in terms of overall significance in their own decision-making journeys, the majority prioritized educational or economic factors as being the most important, with cultural and pandemic factors being less so. However, reflecting comprehensively on the findings, the key

observation for RQ1 is that nuances existed as the students were navigating these choices - the significance of the different motivational factor types appeared to vary depending on where the student was in their decision-making journey for international mobility (i.e. pushing away study options at home, embracing study options abroad, rejecting their less favorable options, or moving forward towards where they were feeling a pull). As this discussion will elaborate in greater detail, the beginning phases of the ISM journey were mainly pushed by cultural motivations for the impulse to leave and not study in the home country. Cultural factors were also the ones most pulling these students in their general attraction to want to travel abroad to obtain their master's degrees. Later on, when making determinations about where exactly to go abroad, cultural motives remained important when participants considered their different country possibilities. However, at this decision-making juncture economic motivations became much more significant, both in relation to foreign study locations and HEIs, as students made choices based on financial aspects they found more appealing or less appealing for these options. Then, when decision-making about which international universities to apply to, educational factors became more prominent as they considered graduate program opportunities. Underlying the rising and falling of the significance of these educational, economic, and cultural motivations, COVID-19 was a baseline throughout, as pandemic-related motives also appeared across the different phases of navigating ISM choices. In addressing RQ1, the study's findings demonstrate the complexities that are involved in the mobility decision-making journey for international students, as the distinct types of motivational factors ebbed and flowed in importance across the various stages of the process.

Noteworthy in the interview data was the fact that all but one of the students chose not to apply to a single university in their home country when considering master's program opportunities. Participants most vocalized being pushed by cultural-related motives as to why they did not want to study domestically. These cultural push factors, which included "political instability" and limitations on "academic freedom" have also been cited as push factors to leave the home country by Caruso and deWit (2015). Another prevailing cultural push factor mentioned by a number of individuals involved deficiencies with the "quality of life." When reflecting on the culture in their home country, they expressed feeling dissatisfied with distinct aspects of the "quality of life" they were experiencing there as contributing to their wanting to get away. Notably, this finding is somewhat different from the ISM literature that

was reviewed for this project, where “quality of life” did not appear as prominently as an emerging general push factor early on in the mobility process.

Once students discarded the notion of studying for a master’s degree in their home country, there were pull factors at play behind their general decision to look abroad for graduate program opportunities that were not specific to any particular location. In terms of the basic motivations behind wanting to study in a foreign country, factors related to cultural aspects again appeared to be fundamentally significant at this point. One such widely shared factor among the students was the desire to “experience different cultures and broaden horizons.” As noted in section 6.1 above, all the participants had previous experiences traveling abroad, and the intention to live in a new country for their graduate studies would provide opportunities for these students to broaden their cultural horizons even further. Brooks and Waters (2009) found in their research on students from the United Kingdom who completed their degrees abroad that previous foreign travel “had instilled in them a desire to explore and actively to seek out alternative experiences” (p. 202). Likewise, the individuals interviewed for this thesis were seeking to expand their cultural horizons in their proactive pursuit to obtain their master’s degree internationally. In this initial phase of their mobility journeys, cultural motives seemed to hold greater importance for participants than they themselves may have realized, considering the spike in cultural-related factors being discussed as they shared about the push factors driving them away from their home country and the pull factors attracting them abroad for their graduate degrees.

Following the choice to study internationally rather than domestically, as students were deciding which foreign study locations and universities to pursue or not pursue during the application phase, economic factors took on a far more central role at this point in their decision-making journeys. “Tuition fees” weighed heavily on nearly all the students’ minds as they perceived the tuition costs broadly at the macro level in some countries to be manageable, while concurrently finding that high tuition costs in places like the United Kingdom and the United States made these nations undesirable as study destination options, eliminating them from further consideration. This economic impetus corresponds with what Eder et al. (2010) described as structural factors in ISM - factors such as monetary issues that outweigh the attractiveness of a country and furthermore that can be either a barrier or a facilitator when choosing a foreign study destination (p. 243). Similarly, in this study, “tuition fees” operated both negatively and positively for many individuals. It was a less favorable economic structural factor when it functioned as a barrier against studying in certain

locations; however, it served as an economic structural pull factor when it attracted interest in other destinations where tuition costs were seen more favorably.

During the application phase, cultural motivating factors maintained a position of importance in student decision-making, though more so for the choice of countries rather than foreign HEIs. Language was one particular cultural area that was highly prominent for the participants, working against some international study destinations yet working in favor of others. “Linguistic isolation” was a factor that about half of the students were concerned about, as they felt uncomfortable with the idea of moving to a new country where they did not have proficiency with the language. These linguistic obstacles made pursuing a master’s degree in particular locations a less appealing prospect, as some perceived this would pose additional challenges, such as having to learn a new language on top of their graduate coursework. Conversely, “language factor” was a significant cultural motivation that made some countries seem more attractive. Many students chose to apply to universities in countries where English, a language they already knew, was either an official language or was known to them to be widely spoken. Eder et al. (2010) found a similar predilection in their research, where students expressed feeling more comfortable studying abroad in English language countries. This was also a practical choice for participants, who felt that being able to communicate in English in the study destination would make their day-to-day life in a new country a bit easier.

In the process of navigating mobility decisions for degree programs abroad, educational motives rose up to become the most important factor when making choices about which HEIs to apply to. Most students had researched “university rankings” and consulted these lists during the application process to get a measure of the global standing of the tertiary education institutions they were considering. Within the HE sector university ranking lists can be viewed with some skepticism for reasons such as methodological concerns. However, the findings suggest that for these international students, the rankings functioned as what Marginson and van der Wende (2007) described as a “reputation maker” (p. 320), in that they helped to provide context about whether or not an institution had global prestige. Furthermore, as foreigners, international students can often face greater information deficits about the quality of HEIs abroad, and global ranking lists can help fill in some of these information gaps (Koenings, Di Meo and Uebelmesser, 2020, p. 6441). In this study, the educational factor of “university rankings” contributed as a two-directional motivation both downwards and upwards; it led participants to regard institutions as being less attractive or

more attractive based on how satisfied they were with a university's placement in these ranking lists as a signifier of their global standing.

In addition to the university's academic reputation, other significant educational motivators when choosing where to apply related to the particular master's programs themselves. The pull factor of the "curriculum" offered by certain graduate programs was meaningful for many people in their decision-making, as was the pull factor of "program specialization" which was noted by students who were seeking very targeted opportunities within their field of study (such as bioinformatics or public international law). This aligns with Chen's (2007) assertion that program characteristics, such as the curriculum and area of specialization form "the core of the overseas study experience," and thus serve a critical role for the international student when determining where to study (p. 287). Finally, two interesting educational pull motivations were unique to BI – the factors of an "easy admission process" due to "strategic alliances with home partners," which appealed as this enabled the students to save time and money by getting exemptions from having to take the GMAT exam as part of the application process. Benefiting from the strong academic links that existed between BI and their undergraduate universities at home, the decision to apply to BI was a pragmatic one for these students, who liked how nicely simple and straightforward the university's application process was for them.

6.2.1 Did Pandemic Motivations Matter?

As the importance of the traditional motivational categories of educational, economic, and cultural reasons shifted depending on where the student was in the decision-making process for their mobility journey, this study's first research question also examines these choices within the unique situational factor of the COVID-19 pandemic. This project explores the significance of pandemic times as a new type of factor, as students had to make choices when applying for master's degree programs abroad amidst extreme uncertainty around the globe. Uncovering pandemic-related motivational factors as they related to ISM was a fascinating and novel aspect of this thesis research, and the pandemic motivations gleaned from the findings encompassed push, pull, and less favorable factors. Due to the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, these are unique factors that the participants would not have needed to navigate had they not been applying to universities abroad during this time.

Similar to the three traditional motivational factor categories, these distinctive pandemic-related motivations surfaced at different junctures as students moved from the initial decision to not pursue a master's degree in their home country, to pursuing international study, to determining where to apply in terms of foreign destinations and universities. Shkoler and Rabenu (2022) described how “forces (sometimes beyond our control, like a global pandemic) ...can either constrain and inhibit, or support and enhance the decision to study abroad” (p. 5). This view does seem to correspond with many of the pandemic motivations that were shared by the students. “Frustrations from being stuck in the home country during the pandemic” created a push dynamic for participants who were looking to escape from the COVID-19 confines they had been living under. The factor of “difficulties with travel restrictions and quarantine” caused apprehension in some individuals that led to them to question whether they should even go abroad at all for a graduate degree. However, pandemic-related motives for mobility were not always perceived as negative. “COVID-19 uncertainty could benefit admission chances” was an encouraging factor for a student who saw an opportunity to improve the likelihood of gaining admission to his top choice master's program amidst the chaos of the pandemic. The pandemic was generally self-assessed by many participants to be a comparatively less important factor in their overall international mobility motivations. However, how these students negotiated the complicated realities of these new COVID-19 factors when making decisions for applying to graduate programs abroad holds its own significance, as an inextricable part of the unique context they were navigating in 2020 and 2021 as prospective international students during a global pandemic.

6.3 What Appealed About Norway: Research Question Two

Moving further along in the decision-making process for international mobility, this discussion will next focus on the second research question posed in this thesis, which addresses the motivations behind the students' selection of Norway and enrollment at BI or UiO for their master's degree studies.

RQ2: What motivational factors ultimately pulled these international students to select Oslo, Norway as the destination for their graduate studies?

Firstly though, when considering the motivations that led these participants to Norway, it is important to acknowledge that as a foreign study destination, Norway was not viewed as entirely perfect or faultless. For example, some expressed feeling less favorably about a

perceived lack of “social friendliness” in the Norwegian culture, while the expensive “cost of living” in Norway was also mentioned as an economic aspect that was viewed as being unappealing. Wiers-Jenssen (2019) has likewise noted that Norway’s high cost of living may discourage international students from being attracted to the country as a study destination. However, its attractive qualities ultimately outweighed any drawbacks in this case study – so this discussion will focus on exploring the positive attributes that pulled these 10 students to decide to come to Norway. Based on the findings, the motivational factors that resulted in their ISM journeys ending in Norway are interconnected in various ways, with pulls that existed both for the country and for the HEIs themselves. To a limited extent, pandemic-related motivations were apparent, although educational, economic, and cultural factors were much more pertinent for RQ2 and the ultimate decision made by these international students to come to Oslo, Norway and enroll at BI or UiO for their master’s degrees.

When considering why Oslo became the foreign study location of choice for these participants coming from outside the EU/EEA, cultural factors played a highly important role in this attraction. The prevalence of the English language being spoken was a greatly significant cultural factor that contributed to these international students’ decision to come to Norway. Many people talked about “language factor” as an appealing pull for Norway, describing how looking for a study destination where English was widely spoken was paramount as it was a language they were already comfortable with. While Norway does not have English as an official language, the ability to widely communicate in English within the country was well-known by participants and seen as a significant plus. One such related benefit was that students believed they would have an easy time finding a part-time job in English during their studies in Norway. Furthermore, with the Norwegian language being generally unfamiliar to those coming from outside the Nordic region (Wiers-Jenssen, 2019), the fact that these non-EU/EEA students could manage by communicating in English was also appealing, as it relieved them of the pressure of having to learn a new foreign language on top of the existing academic demands associated with completing their master’s programs.

In detailing some of the main reasons why international students say they have chosen to come to Norway, Wiers-Jenssen (2019) noted that features of Norwegian society are often cited. In this case study, participants indeed appeared to be attracted by positively perceived aspects of Norwegian culture. The “quality of life” that Norway offered was viewed as one such motivational factor, which interestingly was expressed as a cultural pull factor by students who all came from Asia, and voiced dissatisfaction with some “quality of life”

aspects that had served to push them away from their home countries. Norway's reputation for offering a calmer, slower pace of life and a good work-life balance appealed to them as a direct contrast to what they were seeking to leave behind. The opportunity to enjoy a good "quality of life" in Norway was particularly notable amongst those who were also motivated by migration aspirations to stay in Norway after obtaining their master's degrees. Previous research conducted by Diku (2019) found that over half of international students in Norway reported having some interest in working and living in the country following the completion of their studies. In considering the decision to come to Norway, perhaps even with an eye to migrate there permanently, the cultural pull motivations of "quality of life," as well as "language factor" were among those that contributed the most to making Norway an attractive choice.

Economic pull factors were also quite significant for the students in both their selection of Norway and of BI/UiO. Moreover, the cultural appeal of Norway's "quality of life" noted above can also be connected with the economic motive of "employment opportunities after study" that pulled participants towards the choice of Norway and these universities.

"Employment opportunities after study" was a positive factor in the decision-making process, as these master's students coming from outside the EU/EEA thought strategically about their futures and were keen to have the opportunity to stay and develop their careers in a place where they felt they could enjoy a good life-work balance. Wiers-Jenssen (2019) noted a similar finding amongst full degree international students coming to Norway who were attracted by the chance to improve their career opportunities, which "indicates that degree students tend to have a more long-term perspective on their sojourn; some have permanent migration in mind" (p. 289). Additionally, coming from home countries outside of Europe, some expressed the desirability of gaining an employment foothold in the region following their degrees. For instance, the student from Iran shared that she was keen to go to Norway because there are nice connections between places once you have established your career within EU/EEA countries. In this research, "employment opportunities after study" was found to be relevant as a pull factor not only in the attraction to Norway, but also for choosing BI and UiO. There were students from both universities who believed that acquiring their graduate degrees from these two HEIs located in Norway's capital city would help open doors for their post-study employment - the strong national reputation of these universities within Norway was one such aspect that was mentioned. Brooks and Waters (2011) likewise identified in their research that for international students, seeking a degree abroad can be seen

as “a way of getting a foot in the door by obtaining locally recognized credentials that would facilitate job seeking down the line as they sought permanent settlement” (p. 204). Overall, the decision made by these participants to choose Norway as their foreign study destination can be most greatly attributed to economic factors that included prospects for finding employment after studies, coupled with cultural motivations including the prevalence of English and opportunities to enjoy a good quality of life in the country.

However, not all economic factors were universal for the students in their decision-making, with some differences being noted by university. “Tuition fees” was a pull factor mentioned by all those from UiO, who shared that as a Norwegian public university it was very attractive as there were no tuition costs for international degree-seeking students at the time they were applying. This corresponds to Wiers-Jenssen’s (2019) research on why international students come to the country, as “degree students report absence of tuition fees as the most important reason for studying in Norway” (p. 289). Conversely, as a private university, BI does charge tuition and it was interesting though not surprising that indeed “tuition fees” were not cited by most BI students during the interviews as a pull motivator, as the draw of a tuition-free degree did not apply for this HEI. However, while “tuition fees” were less important to the BI participants, the “ability to obtain funding” was a distinctive pull factor in their selection of the university – highlighting a divide between economic motivations among the participants from these two Norwegian universities where one at the time was operating with tuition fees and the other was operating as tuition-free. Yet, this divide may not ultimately be so substantial after all (within this case study at least), as only two of the BI students ended up having to pay tuition. The other three received full scholarships (one from their employer and two from BI directly) once they had been accepted to the university and thus ended up not having to pay any tuition fees. This “ability to obtain funding” for the full cost of their master’s degrees was strongly expressed by each of these scholarship recipients as having had a major influence on their decision to come to Norway and study at BI.

While economic factors impacted both the final decisions of country and university for these students, educational motivations were also important, though they seemed most closely linked with the choice of BI or UiO rather than with the choice of Norway itself. While prior research on why international students selected to study in Norway identified that academic quality has been a less prominent reason behind their choice (Wiers-Jenssen, 2020), the participants interviewed for this thesis project did seem to consider notions of academic

quality as important in their decision-making. This difference in findings may have a connection to the fact that UiO and BI both appear on global ranking lists, as opposed to more broadly comprehensive research on international students in Norway that involves students in HEIs that do not appear in the global rankings and where academic quality motives may thus play a less crucial role for the international students there. However, among those interviewed for this research, “university rankings” was repeatedly cited as a pull factor that helped convey a positive impression of the educational quality at BI and UiO. In their research on the importance of university rankings for HEI choice, Koenings et al. (2020) similarly highlighted that for international students in Germany, “reputation, which includes the university position in rankings, is an important determinant in the university choice” (p. 6438). In this thesis, the influence of rankings appears to have made both BI and UiO highly appealing options, as participants were impressed by the academic quality of these two HEIs as perceived by their respective appearances on global university ranking lists.

Finally, in addition to the overall reputational attractiveness of these two universities, the selection of BI and UiO was also significantly shaped by the programs themselves, as students were positively motivated by the “program specialization” and “curriculum” of these institutions’ master’s degree offerings. Many shared how they spent a lot of time on the websites of BI and UiO, methodically researching the “curriculum” in terms of the courses and content for the master’s programs they were interested in – both when they were originally deciding to apply to these universities, and then once again when they had received admission offers. In terms of “program specialization,” this was also quite impactful in decision-making, with some students noting that they had very particular academic requirements they were seeking for their graduate studies – such as a participant from BI who wanted to focus on a specific kind of marketing and a participant from UiO who sought an interdisciplinary bioinformatics graduate program. Chen (2007) found that for international students choosing graduate schools in Canada, the “program specialization or uniqueness determined which countries and institutions to pursue” (p. 287). Likewise, for those who were seeking a specialized graduate degree program, the appeal of finding such offerings at BI and UiO was pivotal in their ultimate decision to come to these universities in Norway for their master’s studies. The overall decision to choose BI or UiO was guided by educational-related motivating factors that existed both for the university as a whole and for their particular programs, along with distinctive economic factors that appealed to students from each institution, such as no tuition fees at UiO or receiving scholarship funding at BI.

6.3.1 Pandemic Implications and the Appeal of Norway

Pandemic-related motivations did not seem to be as strongly impactful in the ultimate decision of Norway as a study destination; however, one interesting finding was that there were a handful of people who talked about feeling positive about their “belief that Norway would allow entry for international students during the pandemic.” They recalled in early 2021 feeling confidently optimistic that Norway would lift the travel entry ban that existed for international students so they could physically go and begin their studies in the country that autumn. This did in fact come to pass, as the Norwegian government announced that international students could travel to Norway beginning August 1st to start the autumn 2021 semester in-person, although this announcement was not made until early July of that year (Ministry of Education and Research, 2 July 2021). This timing means that these 10 participants had to commit to the choice of Norway as their study destination to some extent as a leap of faith when confirming their acceptance to BI or UiO in the spring of 2021, as they had no certainty at that time about whether their decision to study in Norway would actually come to fruition amidst the ambiguity of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research findings indicate there was more engagement with pandemic motivations related to the choice of HEI. Because the COVID-19 situation was constantly evolving during early 2021 as these students made their final decisions about which foreign university to attend, many recognized how the situation at that time was quite fluid and uncertain. While more participants felt less favorably about BI and UiO potentially offering online-only classes compared to those who did view this as something favorable, a number of people from both institutions did express feeling like they would just have to accept and adapt to whatever their university decided to do regarding the mode of delivery for classes as the autumn 2021 semester drew nearer. Moreover, one of the most unexpected findings related to pandemic motivations in this study occurred when a participant shared his perspective about how he saw COVID-19 as a beneficial opportunity to pursue his desire to study at UiO. For this student’s international mobility journey, “COVID-19 uncertainty could benefit admission chances” was seen as a strong pull factor that motivated his pursuit to enroll at UiO at a time when he felt the odds of him getting into a competitive graduate program might be better. This factor did ultimately prove advantageous for him, as he applied and successfully achieved his goal by securing admission to his top choice master’s degree program in Norway. When navigating their ISM journeys against the setting of COVID-19, these were

some of the pandemic-related implications that students were mindful of during that time when making decisions to choose Norway and BI or UiO.

6.4 Reflecting on the Theoretical Framework: International Mobility Decisions and Student Agency

The findings from this thesis offer insights relative to the conceptual frame for this study that is based on the theory of agency - specifically Gambetta's three perspectives of student agency in educational decision-making, which has been coupled with Mazzarol and Soutar's push-pull model of migration motivations for study abroad. The international mobility journeys that led participants to Norway have been described as a series of choices occurring over various stages of the decision-making process. In this study, connections can be observed between the motivations behind these decisions and their own agency, beginning with the first two perspectives of Gambetta (1987), the structuralist view and the pushed from behind view, which correlate to Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) push factors in the framework. The two perspectives can be ascribed to the initial choice not to pursue graduate studies in the home country, as well as some of the choices made to eliminate certain foreign study destination and university options.

In the first perspective of student agency, the structuralist view, Gambetta (1987) notes that behavior is guided by external constraints that leave little room for a student having individual choice, and this was visible in motivations shared by participants for why they did not want to study in their home country. Such push motivations included local universities charging high tuition fees, limitations on academic freedom within the nation's HEIs and political instability in the home country. As these complex factors existed outside of their control, they expressed feeling compelled to leave their home countries for their master's degrees. Later on, when considering foreign study destinations, external constraints also appeared to impact student agency, particularly for less favorable economic motivations. For example, some explicitly discussed wanting to study in the United States or the United Kingdom, but the highly expensive tuition fees in both places left them feeling as if they were not actually options that they *could* choose - these countries were simply unaffordable and thus not viable possibilities.

The second perspective of student agency, the pushed from behind view, relates to how norms, beliefs and values can operate unconsciously to drive a person towards a certain

course of action (Gambetta, 1987). This was most relevant early in the mobility process when students described the yearning to leave their home country. Cultural motivations from the findings had some alignment with this pushed from behind view, such as when describing quality of life aspects in their home country that did not fit with how they as individuals wanted to live their lives. However, it is a bit difficult from this limited study to determine whether this was actually occurring at an unconscious level for the participants; those who mentioned a disconnect between their own cultural outlook and the cultural approaches in their home country, for instance around things like work-life balance, did seem to have an awareness of this being associated with their desire to leave. Yet, pandemic-related motivations may have had a closer connection to subconsciously influencing their mobility decisions. At the outset, frustrations from being stuck in the home country, having the pandemic delay study plans, etc. were expressed by students when describing the COVID-19 situation at home in 2020 with words like “suffocating” and wanting a “change of atmosphere.” As the pandemic dragged on without any end in sight, the buildup of such views could be interpreted as having pushed these individuals from behind, driving them to act to change their situation, i.e., leaving their home country and seeking new opportunities abroad.

Pulled from the front, the third student agency perspective, involves purposeful action being taken where students weigh up the benefits of each possibility in order to finally choose the option they are attracted to the most (Gambetta, 1987), which corresponds to Mazzarol and Soutar’s (2002) motivational pull factors in this study’s framework. The findings seem to indicate that pulled from the front was the most significant perspective in the later stages of their international mobility journeys, after they had made the decision to pursue their master’s degree abroad. While some external constraints did impact their choices, such as less favorable tuition fees, by and large these master’s students seemed to use their agency to thoughtfully consider the benefits of various foreign study destination and university options – and ultimately used their agency to determine that Norway and BI or UiO was the most advantageous opportunity for them.

Tran and Vu’s (2018) notion of “agency for becoming” in mobility is also relevant in this context; here, agency is expressed as the self-transformation of the international student and their future aspirations (p. 168), which Xu (2021) later described as “international students’ proactive engagement to achieve the self-transformation within their envisaged life plan” (p. 759). In the findings, this concept of “agency for becoming” is apparent both amongst the

reasons participants found themselves most attracted to Norway and to BI or UiO, as they thought about their longer-term aspirations in life. For example, these two universities appealed as they were viewed to offer specialized programs and/or cover content in their curriculums that would provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in the varied career fields they wanted to pursue, from marketing to bioinformatics. Furthermore, the country was positively perceived as a place where they could foster their future goals, such as being motivated to pursue employment opportunities in Norway after their degrees in order to resettle in a country where the quality of life was viewed as highly attractive. In his work on student agency theory, Gambetta posed an intriguing question: when it comes to educational decision-making, were the students pushed, or did they jump? (1987). Overall, the findings from this thesis suggest that when navigating their motivations during their international mobility journeys, students were pushed most notably in the earliest stages when deciding not to study in their home country, and then had more agency to jump later in the process to choose where they wanted to land, ultimately touching down in Norway at BI or UiO.

7. Conclusion

This report will conclude with a review of the main findings from this study, address some implications of these findings for ISM to Norway in 2023 and beyond, as well as offer suggestions for future research opportunities on ISM in Norway.

7.1 Main Findings

This case study produced qualitative research about the motivations driving international student decisions when applying for master's degree programs abroad and selecting Norway as a study destination. Second-year graduate students from home countries outside of the EU/EEA attending BI and UiO were interviewed to gain deeper perspectives on their international mobility journeys. Interview questions probed their motivations for mobility across four factor categories: educational, economic, and social/political/cultural, as well as a new category of pandemic factors based on the unique COVID-19 context they had to navigate when making application and selection decisions in 2020 and 2021. Underpinning this research was a conceptual framework that joined Gambetta's (1987) theoretical perspectives of students as individual agents in educational decision-making with Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) push-pull model of migration for study abroad choices. This integrated framework provided an avenue to examine the study's unit of analysis, individual students and their motivations, and its variables, the push and pull factors driving the motivations of these students, as they made critical decisions about their foreign study options.

Data analysis yielded findings to address the two research questions posed for this thesis. The first research question asked: for international master's students, what motivational factors were most significant when applying for degree programs abroad during a global pandemic? The findings indicated that the student decision-making journey is complex, as the types of motivational factors ebbed and flowed in significance across its various stages. Cultural factors were the most highly mentioned at the outset, as participants pushed away study options at home and embraced the general pull to study somewhere internationally, with all but one student applying exclusively to universities outside of their home country. A related notable aspect from the data was that all these students had been abroad before (often multiple times) and the majority believed these prior international experiences had an influence on their desire to pursue a master's in a foreign country. Later, as they decided which study locations and HEIs abroad to pursue or not pursue, economic factors were more

central in their decision-making journeys, as some options became financially less attractive and others more attractive. However, throughout the application phase, cultural motivations remained important in student decision-making, though more in relation to choices of countries rather than foreign universities. Perhaps not unexpectedly, educational factors became more significant as they were making choices about which institutions to apply to. Finally, as a new type of factor, the pandemic was generally viewed to be a less significant motivation in their international mobility decisions compared to the other factor categories. However, most recognized they were negotiating new, complicated, often unknown realities in having to take pandemic factors into account when making decisions about applying for foreign master's programs at the time.

The second research question asked: what motivational factors ultimately pulled these international students to select Oslo, Norway as the destination for their graduate studies? Based on the findings, the motivational factors that attracted participants to Norway existed both for the country as an international study destination, as well as for BI and UiO as desirable HEIs. While educational, economic, and social/political/cultural factors were observed to be more relevant in these decisions, pandemic-related factors were apparent. One of this case study's most intriguing findings of a new pandemic motivation was that COVID-19 uncertainty could benefit admission chances, where capitalizing on the ambiguity of pandemic times was viewed as a prime opportunity to get into a competitive master's program when there could be fewer people applying.

In terms of social/political/cultural factors, these were certainly significant in the decision made by the participants to come to Norway. The pull factors of a good quality of life and the language factor of English being widely spoken were among the most pivotal cultural motivations that made Norway an attractive choice in this study. Economic factors were also quite meaningful for students in being pulled both to Norway and to BI or UiO. However, when making decisions about these universities, the kinds of economic factors differed in significance across the two institutions; those from UiO were drawn to the university's lack of tuition fees, whereas the ability to obtain funding was of greater appeal to those from BI. Educational motivations were most important when it came to the selection of BI or UiO rather than of Norway as a foreign study location. University rankings appeared as an educational pull factor for both institutions, as students viewed BI and UiO's respective placements on global ranking lists as a marker of their academic quality. Furthermore,

beyond the reputational attractiveness of these universities, the selection of BI and UiO was also educationally motivated at the program level, where curriculum and program specialization were also noted as key pull factors. The combinations of different motivational factors driving these international students to be pulled to come to Norway and enroll at BI or UiO for their master's degrees in 2021 is particularly interesting when considering that the landscape for ISM to the country looks rather different now, just two years later.

Lastly, when considering the foundational conceptual framework of this thesis, the findings suggest that during decision-making for international mobility, the dynamics of student agency engaged with push and pull motivations in different ways as participants navigated their way through the phases of this process. In the earlier stages of deciding not to study in the home country, push perspectives were more notable; further along, the pull perspective was more important as students used their individual agency to determine the foreign study destinations and universities they found to be the most advantageous for them, ultimately leading them to decide to land in Norway.

7.2 Final Reflections: International Student Mobility to Norway in 2023 and Beyond

Norway was selected as the case study focal point for this research because it stands at an ISM precipice, following the tuition fee policy for full degree students from outside the EU/EEA that went into effect in 2023. Pursuing a graduate degree in Norway is now an expensive proposition: for the 2024-2025 academic year, the fees at UiO for master's programs range from NOK 191 000 to 276 000 per year. Comparatively, the tuition fees at UiO are now more expensive than those at BI, where a master's degree program costs just over NOK 110 000 per year. While the longer-term impacts of Norway introducing tuition fees for this segment of the international student population remains to be seen, there have been some immediate repercussions at the outset of the 2023-2024 academic year. As had been anticipated when this policy change was being rolled out, international student enrollments in Norway have fallen dramatically amongst full degree international students. A 70% decrease in the number of non-EU/EEA students had been estimated by the government (Liu and Solheim, 2023, p. 276). However, based on figures obtained from Norwegian universities by Khrono, the data shows closer to an 80% drop in the overall number of students from outside the EU/EEA enrolling to start a degree program in Norway from 2022 to 2023 (Arnesen and Tønnessen, 2023). It is also important to mention that many within the

Norwegian HE community did not support the government's proposal to initiate these tuition fees and were especially critical of the very tight turnaround time associated with this policy change going into effect for the 2023-2024 academic year. Within this evolving context, there are implications from the research presented in this thesis that may be useful for the Norwegian government and HEIs to reflect on as they think about strategies for attracting international degree-seeking students in 2023 and beyond.

The findings emphasized the importance of educational motivations in participants choosing to attend BI or UiO, including factors such as university rankings which they researched to get an indication of a foreign HEI's academic quality and prestige. However, global ranking lists such as those from QS and FT that were used by the participants apply internationalization metrics in their methodologies for determining these rankings. For instance, according to QS (2023) one of their indicators looks at international student diversity: the ratio of international students to overall students, as well as the diversity of nationalities that those students come from. With the 80% drop in the number of students from outside the EU/EEA enrolled in degree programs in Norway from 2022 to 2023, it is logical to conclude that this may negatively impact these international student diversity indicators at Norwegian universities. Subsequently, the overall positions of the nation's HEIs like UiO on global university ranking lists could very possibly drop in the future since their international student diversity metrics having fallen so dramatically post-tuition policy. Thus, universities in Norway may need to address this by thinking about alternative ways to highlight and convey their institution's strong academic quality and reputation to prospective international students beyond where they may appear on global university ranking lists.

Another significant finding from this study that Norwegian HE stakeholders may also want to consider is the economic motive of the ability to obtain funding. For several of the BI students, receiving funding such as the university's Presidential Scholarship was a major factor in their choice of the school. However, public universities in Norway do not offer scholarship opportunities to incoming international students, and in fact UiO notes on their website that the university is legally prohibited from using their grant funding for scholarships (2023). One action the Norwegian government could consider would be making policy changes that would provide public HEIs with the autonomy to directly award scholarships to academically deserving students who come from countries outside the EU/EEA, as BI is able to do currently. Scholarship opportunities are something that the Norwegian government has already been thinking about, as they are beginning to develop

plans to offer future funding to some international degree-seeking students. In early September 2023, a new scholarship program was announced by the Minister of Research and Higher Education and the Minister of International Development as a collaborative effort that will be launched the following year. While minimal details have been shared thus far, Khrono has reported that the scholarship scheme will be aimed at 200 students who come from the poorest countries in the world (Hystad, 2023). Providing scholarships is certainly a much-needed step in the right direction in terms of attracting foreign students to Norway again, especially those for whom the country's new tuition fees are cost prohibitive. However, as noted in Khrono, the reaction to this announcement by some in the Norwegian HE community is that providing only 200 scholarships is far too low a number (Hystad, 2023). As more details of this new scholarship program are released by the government in the months ahead, it will be interesting to observe the approaches that are taken, such as how and where the scholarships will be promoted, what the eligibility requirements will be, who will be involved in selecting the scholarship recipients, and whether the government ministries will engage the perspectives of other stakeholders like public HEIs in developing this scholarship scheme.

A related economic finding that is notable to consider was that the high cost of living in Norway was viewed less favorably by participants when thinking about the country as a potential international study destination. One way to address this could be to budget scholarships for international students so that they do not merely cover the cost of tuition for the full degree program at a public HEI, but also include some funding that could be applied towards their living expenses in Norway. In fact, this is already in practice at BI, as their Presidential Scholarship covers both full tuition fees along with a stipend each semester to cover approximately 70% of the student's living expenses. This was a significant pull motivation in the decision to come to Norway for the BI participants in this study who were awarded Presidential Scholarships, with one referring to having her tuition and living expenses covered as too good of an opportunity to miss. By developing a comprehensive scholarship strategy to provide non-EU/EEA students at public universities with a sufficient level of funding that addresses both tuition fees and the high cost of living in Norway, the country could enhance its appeal to future international students.

Currently, HE in Norway is experiencing a transformative era regarding ISM. As a country that was already situated on the "semi-periphery" in the global competition for international students (Sin et al., 2021), in 2023 the Norwegian government has eliminated its long-

established “competitive advantage” (Wiers-Jenssen, 2019) – the absence of tuition fees at public universities, which had been one of its strongest selling points for attracting foreign students. With ISM to Norway being fully operational again following the COVID-19 pandemic, the decisions that the nation’s HE stakeholders make in the months and years ahead will be critical in terms of whether or not the country can successfully manage to draw degree-seeking students from outside the EU/EEA. UiO and the country’s other public HEIs may need to take a more entrepreneurial approach and thus “should be able to capitalise on the most attractive pull factors, promoting their capabilities abroad” (Oliveira and Soares, 2016, p. 137). It is important that Norwegian universities are proactive in thinking about what their most appealing attributes are and how they can effectively communicate these strengths to prospective international students. At a national level, strategies could also be actioned by the government to market Norway as an attractive option for foreign students. The initial scholarship scheme for 200 non-EU/EEA students in 2024 is one such approach, albeit a small step forward that some in the country’s HE community wishes were larger. A greater concerted effort may be required from both the national government and universities in Norway to develop innovative new strategies for attracting international students if they want ISM to the country to thrive in this new tuition-fee era. It will be highly interesting to observe what actions are taken by the nation’s higher education stakeholders going forward, and what impacts these efforts have on international student mobility to Norway in the years ahead.

7.3 Suggestions for Future Research

While working on this project it has become apparent that there are many valuable lines of inquiry connected to motivations for ISM, particularly in the Norwegian context, but that were not feasible within the scope of this master’s thesis. For instance, a broader qualitative study with more participants including those enrolled at Norwegian universities outside of Oslo could offer wider perspectives about the motivations behind ISM to the country.

Furthermore, a recommended area for future research would be a longitudinal study to examine the motivations for full degree mobility to Norway compared with the experiences of international students once they have been living in the country for a time. Interviewing students while still in their home country (after confirming an offer from a Norwegian university) and then again post-arrival in Norway could provide beneficial learnings about perceptions vs. reality regarding the motivations driving mobility – were the aspects that

attracted these individuals to Norway as good as they had hoped and were the less favorable aspects as bad as they had feared.

Finally, in terms of further research, there would be tremendous value in replicating this qualitative study again to interview students from outside the EU/EEA who have begun their master's programs in Norway after the tuition policy change was implemented in 2023. The participants in this thesis project chose to come to Norway in 2021 when the country's public universities were still tuition-free. Now that UiO requires fees from non-EU/EEA degree-seeking students, it would be an opportune moment to revisit mobility motivations to research any implications this dramatic shift may have on the motives for coming to study in Norway. For international students, navigating mobility choices is an intense and complex process, and the decisions made when selecting a study destination and university abroad can shape the rest of their lives in profound and meaningful ways. Additional research on ISM, such as the suggestions mentioned above can provide further insights that deepen our understanding of the motivations that push students to leave their home country and pull them to move abroad in the pursuit of higher education.

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Appendix A: Mobility Motivations Thesis Research - Interview Guide

Introduction

Your participation in this interview is most appreciated for this project looking at international student mobility. This thesis research is exploring how the motivations of international students influenced their decision-making for choosing to apply to master's degree programs abroad during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. This project is a case study analysis of international masters students from home countries located outside the European Union/European Economic Area who are currently enrolled at The University of Oslo (UiO) and BI Norwegian Business School (BI) and will also examine the factors that led them to choose to study in Norway at these institutions.

You've already received in advance information about this interview through the participant information letter, along with also a copy of the interview questions. You've provided your signed consent to participate in this interview and to have your responses be recorded, is that correct?

Do you have any questions before we begin the interview? If any questions are unclear or need to be repeated, just let me know.

Background Questions

1. What is the name of the master's program you are currently enrolled in?
2. What was the month and year that you first arrived in Norway as an international student?
3. What was the month and year that you began your master's degree program at UiO/BI?
4. Before coming to Norway for your master's program, have you had prior opportunities to travel internationally – yes or no?
 - 4a. *If yes*, could you briefly elaborate on what regions of the world have you been to, and what the purpose of this travel was (for academic purposes, professional opportunities, volunteering, personal holidays/vacations, etc.)?
 - 4b. *If yes*, do you feel there is any connection between these previous international experiences and your interest in pursuing a master's degree abroad?
 - 4c. *If no*, could you tell me about the circumstances surrounding why you had not traveled internationally before?

Motivations for Applying to International Master's Programs

Let's concentrate first on the *application phase* and focus on those countries and universities that you decided to apply to for a master's degree program. I want to hear about your decision-making process regarding where you applied, and within the context of the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic that occurred during this application period.

5. Did you apply to any master's programs at universities in your home country? Why or why not?
6. For any master's programs that you applied to that were located outside of your home country, in what countries were these universities located?

Next, I want to ask about some specific factors to hear more about any impact they may have had on your personal decision-making process in determining where to apply.

7. Tell me about any thoughts you had regarding educational or academic influences on your decisions about universities and/or countries when applying for master's programs abroad.
8. Can you discuss any economic factors that played a role in determining which international higher education countries and/or institutions that you decided to apply to?
9. Could you discuss any other factors that were relevant for you personally, such as social aspects, cultural or political reasons, etc., that you considered when deciding to apply to international study destinations?
10. The timing of when you were applying for master's programs coincided with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tell me about your thoughts and feelings at that time related to the practicalities of the pandemic when deciding to submit applications for graduate programs abroad?
11. Of the particular motivational factors we've discussed (educational factors, economic factors, social/political/cultural factors, and pandemic-related factors), which do you feel were most influential and least influential in your decisions about where you applied?

Finally, let's chat about the *selection phase*, once you received admissions decisions from the universities that you had applied to.

12. Of the acceptances that you received, what were the universities and where were they located?
13. What were the primary features that drew you to select (The University of Oslo/BI Norwegian Business School) as the higher education institution you wanted to attend for your master's degree?
14. What were the main reasons that made you choose Oslo, Norway as your international study location?
15. What were your feelings about Norway's COVID regulations – such as travel and entry requirements, etc. for international students arriving in 2021 to start their studies?

Conclusion

16. Is there anything else you would like to add before we conclude our conversation?

Appendix B: Coding Framework of Mobility Motivation Factors

Elements of Student Decision-Making	Educational Factors	Economic Factors	Social/Political/Cultural Factors	Pandemic Factors
General Motivational Factors for Deciding to Pursue Master's Studies Abroad vs. at Home				
1a: <i>Push</i> Factors for deciding to study for a master's internationally, rather than in the student's home country				
1b: <i>Pull</i> Factors for deciding to study for a master's internationally, rather than in the student's home country				
Motivational Factors for Applying to and Selecting Foreign Destinations for Master's Studies				
2a: <i>Less Favorable</i> Factors for potential international study locations				
2b: <i>Pull</i> Factors for potential international study locations → choosing Norway				
Motivational Factors for Applying to and Selecting Foreign Higher Education Institutions for Master's Studies				
3a: <i>Less Favorable</i> Factors for potential HEIs for master's studies				
3b: <i>Pull</i> Factors for potential HEIs for master's studies → choosing BI/UiO				

Appendix C: Participant Information Letter and Consent Form

Are you interested in taking part in the research project:

” Mobility Motivations: How masters students navigated decisions when applying to international study destinations during the COVID-19 pandemic”?

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to explore how international students navigated their personal motivations when making decisions about choosing a master’s degree program abroad during the timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

This project is a master’s thesis at The University of Oslo Department of Education. This master’s thesis aims to develop a better understanding of decision-making about foreign study destinations for current international students who chose to study in Norway. The project is a case study analysis of international masters students enrolled at the University of Oslo (UiO) and BI Norwegian Business School (BI).

The central research questions for this study are as follows:

- For international students, what motivations are most influential in their decision to apply for a master’s degree program abroad during the time of a global pandemic?
- To what extent have these masters students considered pandemic-related factors when choosing their international study destination?

Who is responsible for the research project?

The University of Oslo is the institution responsible for this research project. Tracy Waldman, a master’s student at the Department of Education, is the responsible researcher. Anne Line Wittek, Head of Studies at the Department of Education is the project leader.

Why are you being asked to participate?

You are being asked to participate as a currently enrolled international masters student who began their studies at The University of Oslo or BI Norwegian Business School for the

Autumn 2021 semester and have experience with applying to and selecting a master's program abroad during the timeframe of the pandemic. Participant contact information was gathered from various sources, and your information may have been gathered through LinkedIn, Facebook, from fellow international students (with permission), or from staff at The University of Oslo or BI Norwegian Business School (with permission). This study intends to conduct approximately 8-10 interviews in total, evenly divided between students from UiO and BI. These two universities were selected due to both having a robust number of international masters students enrolled while maintaining varying tuition structures.

What does participation involve for you?

I am asking you to partake in a personal interview lasting approximately 30-60 minutes to discuss your personal experiences with motivations for international student mobility. The questions in the interview are open-ended and cover topics such as what key factors motivated your decision to apply for a master's degree program outside of your home country and what made you choose Norway as the destination for your postgraduate study. These themes will be similar for all groups of participants interviewed. The interviews will be conducted in-person or remotely via Zoom. Any remote interviews will be conducted in accordance with UiO's regulations for research conducted via Zoom, and any in-person interviews will be recorded using Nettskjema-diktafon — an application for smartphones that is the official recording service developed and approved by The University of Oslo.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in this project is completely voluntary. If you chose to participate, you may withdraw your consent at any time without providing a reason. All personal information and information from you will be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you decide not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

Your personal data will only be used for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. Your personal data will be processed confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (i.e. the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act). This means that:

- Aside from the researcher, Tracy Waldman, the project leader at The University of Oslo, Anne Line Wittek, could also have access to the data gathered in this project.

- No persons beside the masters student and the project leader will have access to personal data.
- All data will be stored on a protected, University of Oslo approved server.
- Participant identities and all identifying data will be hidden in the processed data and the released research.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

This project is scheduled to end in December 2023. The results will be reported in this student's master's thesis. Audio recordings and anonymised transcripts will be deleted at the conclusion of the project in January 2024. While the project is ongoing, these recordings and transcripts will be stored on Nettskjema where only the masters student and the project leader will have access to it.

Your rights

As long as you can be identified in the data collected, you have the right to:

- Access the personal data that is being processed about you.
- Request that your personal data be deleted.
- Request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified.
- Receive a copy of your personal data (data portability).
- Send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or to the Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data.

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

Your data will be processed based on your consent. This research project was approved by The University of Oslo and the Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS (NSD) which means that the processing of personal data in this project was deemed to be in accordance with data protection legislation in Norway.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- The Department of Education at The University of Oslo via the responsible researcher, Tracy Waldman (email: tracyw@uio.no) and/or the project leader, Anne Line Wittek (a.l.wittek@iped.uio.no).

- Data Protection Officer at The University of Oslo: Roger Markgraf-Bye (email: personvernombud@uio.no).
- Data Protection Services, by email: (personverntjenester@sikt.no) or phone: +47 53 21 15 00.

Yours sincerely,

Tracy Waldman (responsible researcher) and Anne Line Wittek (project leader)

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project Mobility Motivations and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- to participate in an interview and to have this interview be recorded.

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approximately December 2023.

(Signed by participant, date)

Appendix D: Participant Prior International Experiences

Participant Details: Current University and Home Country	Had Been to Norway Before Master's Program in 2021?	Had Previous History with International Mobility for Higher Education?	Notable Prior International Experiences
1. BI/Japan	Yes	Yes	Did an undergrad exchange year in Canada
2. BI/Kenya	Yes	No	Worked in Kenya for a Norwegian company, had been to Norway before on work trips
3. BI/Kazakhstan	Yes	Yes	Did a semester exchange in Norway at BI as an undergrad
4. BI/Mexico	No	Yes	Did an undergrad semester exchange in France
5. BI/Uzbekistan	No	Yes	Did their full bachelor's degree in South Korea
6. UiO/Venezuela	Yes	No	Traveled extensively and visited Norway on layovers while working as a flight attendant
7. UiO/Argentina	No	No	Did a 2-week German language course in Europe
8. UiO/Taiwan	Yes	Yes	Did several exchange programs – in the US, Japan & Denmark
9. UiO/Iran	No	No	Had been abroad only once – on a family holiday at age 12
10. UiO/India	No	Yes	Did a first master's degree in the UK