

INTRODUCTION

According to the International Labour Organisation, as the most mobile social group, the youth are responsible for the largest share of annual migratory movements (ILO, 2021). Simultaneously, the mobility makes an important part of their life experience. A separate group of young migrants are students, whose reasons for migration are specific for two reasons. On one hand, student migration are temporally limited to certain age, while on the other, they are mainly motivated by acquiring knowledge, qualifications and skills, and thus they entail investment in education which is deemed to be crucial in the creation of human capital (Keeley, 2007).

In line with the global internationalisation of higher education, the number of international students has significantly increased in recent decades all over the world, with the tendency of further rise. In 2022, the greatest number thus far (1.9 million) of residence permits was issued to international students involved in tertiary education in the European countries, members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2023). It is believed that acquiring university education is indeed the most important factor in explaining the migration decision-making process and migration patterns of young people (Belmonte et al. 2020).

International students, usually temporary migrants, are a valuable resource for the host country, which is particularly important for the countries with fertility rates below the rate of replacement of generations (Hawthorne, 2010). Their temporary mobility stimulated by education may influence the decisions on their next migration and country of destination. The importance of students with an international experience of education for the social development of their country of origin, as well as the country of destination, is increasingly recognised. In different strategic documents of economically developed countries, but also of those less developed, highly educated labour force with the experience of international education, and its availability on the labour market represent an important element of both social and economic development (European Commission, 2020). Therefore, in different scientific disciplines (including geography, demography and sociology), there has been an increasing interest for researching the patterns of international student migration, students' migration motives, experiences and challenges they face. However, this topic has been under-researched in Serbia. We have been missing the data and studies concerning scholarship recipients from

Serbia and young, highly educated returnees (Vasojević et al., 2018), as well as international students who study or studied in Serbia. Therefore, there is no systematic research on contemporary student migration in and from Serbia. Furthermore, also under-researched is the manner in which studying abroad influences (re)shaping of the identities of students coming to or emigrating from Serbia. All the aforementioned facts influenced our decision to draft a plan for the research that would address this topic, and to realise it, this being the first piece of research of this kind in Serbia.

The realised research project, the results of which are contained in this volume, has taken into account classical migration theories, but it has primarily been based on the concept of transnationalism. If the emphasis is put on migrant networks, this concept deals with the “links between people, places and institutions, which exceed the borders of national state” (Vertovec, 2009: 1), and lead to the “establishment of sustainable cross-border relations, patterns of exchange and social affiliation” (Vertovec, 2009: 2). Bearing in mind the aforementioned, such a concept justifies the application of a mixed methods research approach. Affiliation of individuals in the context of global migration, is often characterised by “double or multiple identities” (Vertovec, 2009).

Though few, the pieces of empirical research indicate that international student migration, students’ residence and studying abroad, return to their country of origin, or further migration, are indeed dynamic transnational experiences (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Such experiences are characterised by constant negotiation, reconstruction and enrichment of their identities, as they attempt to imbue sense in their daily lives in any place that they might be tied to, or the location they feel they belong to (Vertovec, 2009; Oppong, 2013). The challenges of adjustment to new environment, such as learning a new language and adaptation to another culture, represent transnational experiences that significantly contribute to acquiring or strengthening of intercultural competences of international students. These experiences are in themselves transitional and transformational, so it is assumed that they also involve a certain degree of changes in one’s identity (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day 2010; Liu & Rathbone, 2021). According to the definition of the Higher Education Academy of Great Britain, intercultural competences are those attitudes, knowledge and skills that involve the person’s ability to get along, work and learn with members of different cultures (The Higher Education Academy, 2013:3). Thereby the dynamic and complex experience of residing and studying abroad influences constant building and upgrading of the components of one’s social, cultural, spatial, professional, ethnic and other identities. Such an experience by international students, according to the findings by Wiebl (2015), as well as Sing et al. (2007), may lead to the formation of a cosmopolitan identity, that is, as noted by Tsouroufli (2015) and

Adewale et al. (2018) a hybrid (mixed) identity, manifested as multiple identities. The very concept of hybrid identity is seen by Simonis (2012: 51) as a bridge that connects cultures and people. When we talk about international students, the very expression “international students” is said by Bista (2016), to represent a temporary identity of all mobile students.

The very dynamism of the terms *identity* and *international students*, their mutual connection and influence, are at the core of this research. Some of the questions which are contained in this volume, posed at the beginning of working on this project and resolved through the research results, include:

- How do international students perceive and express their identities?
- Does the experience of education abroad and adjustment to new social environment influence the transformation of international students’ identities, and in what way?
- Does the experience of international student migration lead to a change in the individual and collective forms of identity? If yes, is this change equally pronounced in all forms of identities and how is it manifested?
- How do international students approach the challenges of transformations in their own identities?

Responses to these questions, contained in the articles of this collection, have the aim of expanding scientific knowledge on the causes, consequences and patterns of international student migration in the context of Serbia.

Methodological framework of the research is presented in the first article in this study, authored by S. Stojšin who defines and operationalises the terms *of international student migration*, *identity* and *reconstruction of identity*, as well as the dimensions and indicators used in constructing the research tools. The article also describes the methods and techniques of data collection, samples of respondents, relevant variables, but also the methodological challenges, such as abstractedness of the term *identity* and specific characteristics of the sample.

Historically perceived, Serbia has a long and significant tradition of international student migration, which has also shaped the contemporary context of the research, indicated in the introductory article by N. Vasojević. Using the perspective of push-pull migration theory, the author analyses crucial factors that influence students’ decision to study abroad. The socio-economic conditions considered in the paper, as well as interaction of fundamental motives and socio-demographic variables, show that during almost two centuries, many of the motives of Serbian students have not significantly changed, but also that the contemporary trends of more and more intense student migration have largely affected Serbia.

The manner in which student migration reflect on identity is the central topic of this collection, and M. Vesković Anđelković, J. Predojević Despić, V. Vidicki and J. Petrić in their contributions consider national, cultural, professional and spatial identity of international students. M. Vesković Anđelković analyses the impact of socio-demographic and migratory characteristics, as well as emotional ties with the country of origin, on the intensity and formation of one's national identity. By considering cultural identity in a wider context, the analysis of (the lack of) socio-cultural links between international students and their countries of origin and destination by Predojević Despić points to the manners in which such links shape their identities. V. Vidicki observes international students from the perspective of contemporary trends present in higher education, such as "work-integrated learning", "academic capitalism", etc. Vidicki explains the ways in which the experience of international migration influences shaping of students' professional identities, their subjective perception of the position of their profession and working conditions, as well as their future career planning. Changes in spatial identity, under the influence of international student migration are considered in the article by J. Petrić. The author links the theoretical foundations for the research with the analysis of the role and significance of space, i.e. micro-surroundings of students, as well as the intensity of their emotional and/or pragmatic attachment to these spaces, where the emotional attachment is based on the subjective feelings of students, while the pragmatic stems from the objective circumstances of organisation of their daily life.

Finally, the last contribution deals with the manner in which international student migration influence personal changes in their main actors. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, founding the theoretical framework on contemporary conceptions of intercultural adaptation and socio-cognitive theory, V. Lukić shows the way that these changes impact different aspects of students' lives and lastingly change the self-perception of their identity, lifestyle, daily organisation, mentality and relations with other individuals and groups.

Results of the research confirm that application of a mixed-methods approach is a good way to overcome limitations of each individual method in investigating the problem of international students' identity reconstruction. Though they cannot be generalised, the research findings show that the quality of study programmes, institutional support and economic environment of the destination country are the most important factors that shape the motives and decisions of international students. Furthermore, student migration is often but a first step in future labour migration, and it occupies an important place in professional career planning.

When we talk about the impact of this type of migration on one's perception of self, country of origin, or country of destination, findings of our research indicate that hybrid national identity is predominant among international students, having also the potential to contribute to one's native country with the adequate state stimulus and support. Also, by inevitably exposing international students to communication with members of different cultures, academic mobility makes them acquire intercultural competence, thus contributing to this part of their personal and professional development and enriching their identity to transcend the borders of formal education. International student migration elicit ambivalent feelings and differences in the emotional and pragmatic attachment to the places of origin and studying. It may be concluded that studying abroad largely stimulates one's personal development, especially openness towards new cultures, but that the process of adapting may also include different challenges. The authors emphasise the positive impact of enriching one's identity and developing intercultural skills on the socio-economic development of the countries of origin and destination of international students. In line with this, creation of favourable conditions for intercultural connections is imposed as a crucial precondition in social integration.-

Contributions of this study are primarily scientific and they are reflected in acquiring new knowledge pertaining to the experience of studying abroad, especially when we talk about the impact of such migration on the personal development and identity of individuals, as well as on understanding of present mechanisms of adaptation to cultural differences. The results of this research may stimulate scientific discussions of this subject and serve as an inspiration for future research in the field of identity transformation and adaptation of international students. Secondly, the contributions of this study are social, in the context of raising awareness of the importance and provision of scholarships for students from developing countries, which is in line with the sustainable development goal 4B from Agenda 2030 and stimulation of internationalisation of higher education in Serbia. Finally, this study represents a contribution to the field of public policies, since the acquired findings could not only stimulate, but also be used in the creation of policies and strategies for further internationalisation of higher education in Serbia, as well as in improving the integration of foreign students and their inclusion in the communities on different levels.

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