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METHODOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESEARCH

Abstract

The paper presents the methodology of the research of international student migration, i.e. of the (re)construction of their identities. The phases of the research are described, as well as methodological obstacles that we have encountered in working on this project, together with the manners in which we have overcome these obstacles. The foundation of the paper consists of an analysis of the characteristics of the utilised methods, and of the sample to which they have been applied. During the data collection phase, three research methods were implemented. The initial framework for the research, more precise definitions of the basic terms and their dimensions have been based on the results of focus-group interviews. Quantification of the results was made possible after the application of an online survey in which the basic terms, such as identity change and characteristics of international student migration, were more precisely operationalized. The final method used in the collection of the data to elucidate the aspects of international migration of students insufficiently researched through using the first two methods, was qualitative interview. With implementing qualitative interview and using an interview guide, the process of data collection was rounded up. During the data collection, the sample was divided into four groups of respondents, i.e. the students who had had an experience of international studying longer than a year. The first group consisted of Serbian students studying abroad, the second included Serbian students who had studied abroad but returned to Serbia or left for another country. Foreign students were also divided in two groups: those currently studying in Serbia, and those who had studied in Serbia, but returned to their country of origin after the studies.

Keywords: international academic migration, focus groups, online survey, qualitative interview, sample, identities

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The research of reconstruction of the identity of international students and characteristics of international student migration in general assumed making a comprehensive research plan. Due to the complexity of the researched subject, theoretical and empirical research of international student migration was realised in a number of phases that shall be explained hereinafter.

Operationalization of Terms

The point of departure in constructing the draft of the research comprised two terms: international student migration and change or reconstruction of identity. Without delving deeper into theoretical consideration and analysis of these terms¹, we note that international students are a numerous group with many common characteristics such as the language barrier, probable financial and accommodation problems, socio-cultural differences and negotiations, as well as major uncertainty concerning their future place of residence and professional fulfilment (Liu & Rathbone, 2021). These, for the time being temporary migration, i.e. arrival into a different living environment and social conditions, with a new value system and different cultural norms, require certain level of adjustment, which could result in their identity transition or transformation (Hale, Rivas & Burke, 2020; Liu & Rathbone, 2021). In this very fact lies the initial, rather flexible *hypothesis of our research draft*, since we have assumed that the experience of international studying which incorporates the aforementioned migratory aspects, would more or less influence a change in the identity of the researched population's members. *Research aim* has been formulated as researching the characteristics, opinions and attitudes of international students, i.e. of their experience of studying abroad and potential transformation of the personal and collective identity.

The second term that we attempt to explain here as shortly as possible, is that of identity as a fluid, open system, becoming in its nature (Liu & Rathbone, 2021: 42). We have observed it as a social category which represents “a result of interaction between people, institutions and practice in which an individual is involved” (Vesković Anđelković & Vasojević, 2023: 1076), where both the way that the individual sees him/herself and the way that others see him/her are important, “which is connected to the social context in which he/she lives, as well as with the social practices in which he/she is involved in his/her everyday life” (ibid, 1076). Bearing in mind the abstract nature of the term of identity and its multiple forms, it is clear that that it is very hard to operationalize (Blasi, 1988: 226). We started from the most common division of identities to individual and collective ones, having in mind that collective identity is a multi-layered phenomenon which needs to be researched through an interdisciplinary approach².

¹ These, as well as other terms used in the research, would be dedicated more attention to in the remaining chapters. Here, so as to be able to analyse the data collection tools, we will refer merely to the process of their operationalization.

² The very fact that collective identities are indeed a subject of research in sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, ethno-linguistics, as well as other sciences and scientific disciplines, makes it clear that this is a complex research subject with many dimensions and aspects.

Operationalization of the term of identity is supported with explanations of some of the term's dimensions. Firstly, we have had in mind that formation of identity is a process in which young people, usually adolescents, reach answers to the questions such as: who am I; where do I belong; where do I want to get to and what do I want to become (Трајков & Арнаудова, 2011: 39), as well as the questions: what are my origins, what does arrange my value system and is there harmony between my own and the value system of the society that I belong to (Николић, 2016: 40). We also had in mind that both personal (individual, one's own) and collective identity (identity of social groups) are formed "under the influence of numerous genetic, cultural, social and personal factors, of internal and external processes" (Mitrović, 2009: 43, according to Николић, 2016: 41).

In operationalizing the term of identity we could not have avoided the 12 abstracted but mutually connected elements of Erikson's concept of identity quoted by Augusto Blasi (Blasi, 1988), that have subsequently been of great help: 1) Identity is an answer to the question, "Who am I?" 2) In general, the answer consists of achieving a new unity among the elements of one's past and the expectations about one's future 3) giving origin to a fundamental sense of sameness and continuity. 4) The answer to the identity question is arrived at by realistically appraising oneself and one's past; 5) By considering one's culture, particularly its ideology, and the expectations that society has for oneself, 6) while at the same time questioning the validity of both culture and society and the appropriateness of others' perceptions and expectations (crisis). 7) This process of integration and questioning should occur around certain fundamental areas, such as one's future occupation, intimate relationships, and religious and political ideas, 8) and should lead to a flexible but durable commitment in these areas; 9) such that it guarantees, from an objective perspective, one's productive integration in society, 10) and, subjectively, a sense of basic loyalty and fidelity, 11) as well as deep, preconscious, feelings of rootedness and well-being, self-esteem, and purposefulness. 12) The sensitive period for the development of identity are the adolescent years. (Blasi, 1988: 226–227).

Dissecting the term of collective identities, that may be discussed according to different criteria,³ we have generally classified them in the following way: *group, cultural, subcultural, class-strata, ethnic, religious, professional, ideological, party, gender, generational and native identities* (Николић, 2016: 43; Petrić & Lukić, 2023: 1101), as well as *national*. However, social changes, primarily expanding of globalisation and creation of supranational structures, influence acceptance of

³ E.g., classification according to the manner of organisation, scientific discipline and numerous other approaches (Mutavdžić, 2017: 144). Similarly, we must not forget that classification of collective identities is also influenced by the historical type of the society and its characteristics, so these classifications differ with different authors.

different value systems, so discussions concerning new forms of identities also occur. First of all, what has been discussed is a *supranational identity*, e.g. European identity (Mutavdžić, 2017), for which we assumed that might occur in some of the students; or, for example, with the development of digital technologies and more prominent importance of social networks, we come to the creation of *digital identity*. In order to examine whether and to what extent a change or reconstruction of the identity occurred in international students, we also used a “list” of the traits that participate in the creation of different collective identities, including, inter alia: common perceptions and outlooks; synchronised beliefs, aims and value; similar lifestyles; models of action; basic cultural patterns; sense of collective belonging; common faith; tradition and customs; language; script; geographical residence; economy; common historical origin and experience; awareness of the common origin and historical experience; legends and myths; awareness of ethno-genetic kinship; sense of solidarity and affection; system and organisation of social life (Николић, 2016: 40). Bearing in mind the multi-layered character of collective identities and their different forms, this research pays the most attention to: social, cultural, ethnic, professional and spatial identities.

In addition to international student migration, reconstruction of identity represents the key term in all phases of the research, making the connection between the terms of international students and identity. Reconstruction of an identity does not imply “full discarding of the solid core, i.e. its primary difference” (Vesković Anđelković, 2024: 464) since “the process of adaptation and integration into a new social environment is not realised equally for every individual. Numerous factors, such as country of origin and reception, socio-economic status of the individual, his/her parents’ education and profession, available material and economic resources, the ethnic group to which he/she belongs, as well as the degree of proficiency in the language of the country of destination, have impact on the manner and level of his/her adaptation in the destination country (Tavares, 2021, p. 87; Vesković Anđelković & Bobić, 2019, p. 203)” (Vesković Anđelković, 2024: 465). A majority of these factors has been incorporated in the data collection tools. These tools were created based on the indicators that we had obtained in analysing these terms. Therefore, all phases of the research involved using of some of the following indicators:

- Changes in self-perception during the studying abroad. For the students who had returned to their countries of origin, another time point was added – the period after the return. This change was analysed through seeking the answer to question “Who am I?” i.e. who the student had been before the arrival, and who he/she was now, during the studies abroad, or after the return.

- Affiliation with certain groups in the country of reception – affiliation before the migration and during the studies (contacts with the people from the country of origin also residing in the reception country; contacts with people belonging to other groups and with the domestic population).
- Frequency of contact with the people in the country of origin/country of reception; the location of making the contact in the country of reception.
- Identifying similarities and differences between cultures (what they like the most, what they would not like to see in their country of origin that is characteristic for the country of reception, etc.).
- Acceptance of lifestyle in the country of reception (cultural differences, rules, customs, etc.).
- Knowledge of the language of the country where they study, the problems that occur due to the (lack of) knowledge of the language used in the environment.
- The way they assess their past, what they expect from the future, etc.

DATA COLLECTION – METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

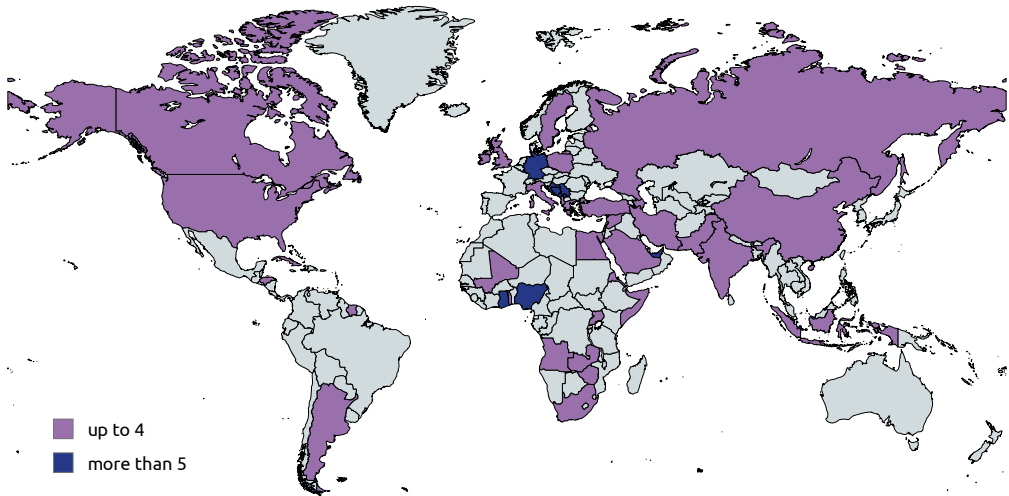
Realisation of the research project, that is, collection of the data, was executed in three phases. In each of the phases, different data collection methods were used: the first phase involved focus group interviews, the second included online survey, while the final phase involved implementation of qualitative interview. The sample was divided into four groups of respondents:

- The first group was composed of students from Serbia studying abroad;
- The second group included students from Serbia who had studied abroad, but returned to their country of origin or moved to some other country;
- The third group involved foreign students studying in Serbia;
- The final, fourth group was made of respondents born outside of Serbia, who had studied in Serbia for at least one year and then returned home, or went elsewhere.

Some of the respondents studied in more than one state. The condition for participation in the research was that the period of studying outside of one's country of origin had not been shorter than one year⁴ and that respondents were not older than 35.

⁴ It is assumed that one year is a minimum period after which international students start to adopt behavioural patterns of the natives of the country in which they study.

Map 1 depicts origin of the respondents who participated in the research. The countries of origin have been marked for all 259 respondents, regardless of the phase of the research they participated in. The specific characteristics of the sample in terms of the phases of research that respondents participated in, will be explained below.



Map 1. Where do students (respondents) come from?

The First Phase of Data Collection

Bearing in mind that focus group interviews get the best results in the initial phases of researching phenomena of which there are not much data, as well as that the researched phenomenon is complex, the first phase of the research has involved collecting data by means of this very research approach. It has already been stated that the initial assumption did not incorporate firmly established causal relations, but rather involved a degree of flexibility. Focus group interview was chosen in order to define the initial hypotheses more precisely, but also in order to extricate different variables to be used in the subsequent phases of the research, primarily in the firmly structured questionnaires. The data were collected in three focus groups during June 2023, where each group involved 6 respondents.

The interviews were led by moderators and their assistants, using the focus group interview guide. The focus group interview guide included the following interviewing subjects: perception of identity (who are you?, how do you present yourself to others, changes and differences in the identity before and during the migration, i.e. studying); making decisions concerning the migration (when

they made the decision, who influenced the decision...); arrival to the reception country (first impressions, similarities and differences with the country of origin, problems that they encountered after their arrival...); different identities (social: friends from the country of origin and country of destination, contacts with the family...; cultural: way of life in both these countries, customs, clothes, nutrition, leisure, language, attending courses...; spatial: where they felt at home...; professional: career plans, manner of finding a job, whether international education would be an advantage in finding a job...; and plans or the future.

The central place in the focus group interview (FGI) guide was dedicated to the group of questions that referred to researching different identities extricated based on the conceptual framework: social, cultural, ethnic,⁵ professional and spatial identities. This group of questions included the aforementioned indicators, but the guide was thus conceived that it allowed identification of new ones.

The entire course of the interview was recorded, and the recordings were subsequently transcribed from the audio. Even though it is recommended for FGI to last for 1.5 to 2.5 hours, these interviews lasted for 2 to 2.5 hours, which indicates the complexity of the topics covered, but also the quality of the conversations and interest of the respondents to discuss these issues.

In addition to the FGI guide, a short anonymous structured questionnaire was made, including socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (gender, age, education, origin, assessment of material condition...), and this questionnaire was filled in by the respondents before the very FGI.

A questionnaire for evaluation of the work in focus groups was also made, intended for researchers, i.e. the moderators and assistants who participated in realisation of the FGIs. After realisation of the FGIs, the researchers used this questionnaire to state the data concerning the number of participants, assessed advantages and shortcomings of the conversation, as well as potential methodological flaws that they had encountered in guiding the FGIs, such as negative reactions of the respondents to certain questions, assessment of the group's size, etc. Research so far has indicated that a successful focus group is the one in which the respondents do not direct their answers to the moderator, but to one another, providing reasoning for their opinions, or asking explanations from other participants (Đurić, 2005), which was indeed the case in these groups. High quality data were obtained and subsequently classified.

Characteristics of the sample: Students had been invited to participate in the research via the Institute of Social Sciences website, but regardless of this fact,

⁵ Ethnic identity was indirectly researched here, via allocating significance to the differences in the aforementioned aspects of social life in the countries of origin and destination, while it was dedicated more attention in the next phase.

the researchers were forced to use the snowball method and thus fill the focus groups with students of appropriate characteristics.⁶

The FGIs were realised in three separate focus groups, one of which was realised in Novi Sad, while two were realised in Belgrade.⁷

The first focus group held at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad was participated in by 6 students from Serbia, who had studied abroad for at least one year.⁸

The first focus group in Belgrade was participated in by 6 young professionals who had finished a portion of their university studies abroad and returned to Serbia, while the second focus group had 6 foreign students studying in Serbia. The collection of data with both these group in Belgrade was realised in the Institute of Social Sciences.⁹

The focus groups were participated in by 18 respondents in total, 12 of which were women, while 6 were men. This gender structure may be explained with the already confirmed fact that women are more likely to participate in research. The average age of Novi Sad respondents was 25.6 years. The respondents in the first Belgrade group had 34.2 years on average¹⁰, while the average age of the foreign respondents was 28.2.

Among the Serbian students in both groups, there were two students who had studied in Belgium, as well as in the UK, while there was one student who had studied in each of the following countries: France, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Italy, USA, Austria, Spain and Hungary. Among the foreign students who participated in this phase of the research, two were from Suriname, and one from Iran, Syria, Indonesia and North Macedonia each.

⁶ It is assumed that failures to respond were mainly caused by the fact that the data were being collected during the summer, so many potential respondents were unable to participate in the research.

⁷ In processing the data collected in the focus groups, all the researchers in their papers marked the responses that they highlighted in the following way: FG 1 NS (Serbian students studying abroad); FG 1 Bg (Serbian students who returned to Serbia after their studies); FG 2 Bg (foreign students studying in Serbia).

⁸ The problem of failure to respond was particularly prominent in this group, since most of these students were at the time occupied with the June/July exams, so they were still abroad, in the places where they studied. It seems that it would have been more appropriate if the collection of data with this group had been organised online.

⁹ Foreign students who had studied in Serbia, but returned to their country of origin (the fourth group) did not participate in the focus groups, primarily as other three groups were participating in focus groups in person, which was not possible for this group of the respondents. Also, there was no database from which we could source the sample, or at least their e-mail addresses. This was also the reason that this group did not participate in the qualitative interview either, but they only participated in the filling in of the online survey, an ideal method for collecting data from the respondents who live in remote locations.

¹⁰ The research draft envisaged for the participants in this group, just like other groups of respondents, not to be older than 30, yet the difficulties experienced in finding respondents and a high rate of non-responding resulted in this condition being ignored in realising this focus group.

The questionnaire that the respondents filled in before the focus groups asked them to assess the material situation of their family before they had gone abroad. The most satisfied with the material situation were the participants of the Novi Sad focus group, i.e. the students from Serbia studying abroad at the time of the data collection. Namely, 4 respondents assessed the material situation before their studies as very good, while 2 referred to it as being satisfactory, which makes the average mark in this group 3.66.¹¹ The satisfaction was somewhat lower among the participants of FG 2 Bg, i.e. among the foreign students studying in Serbia, who assessed their material situation prior to coming to Serbia as satisfactory (3.00 on average), while the least favourable material situation before going abroad, in their own assessment, had been that of the respondents in FG 1 Bg, i.e. returnees to Serbia: 2 assessed it to be poor, 2 as satisfactory, 1 very good, while one respondent failed to respond, which resulted in the average mark of 2.8.

Educational qualifications before going abroad varied widely among the respondents. The largest share of the respondents had finished basic university studies before going abroad (33.3% of the respondents), while one of the respondents had already had a PhD (Table 1).

Table 1. Educational qualifications before studying outside one's country of origin

	Total	FG 1 NS	FG 1 Bg	FG 2 Bg
Total	18 (100.0)	6 (100.0)	6 (100.0)	6 (100.0)
Secondary school	4 (22.2)	3 (50.0)	–	1 (16.7)
College	2 (11.1)	–	–	2 (33.3)
University	6 (33.3)	2 (33.3)	2 (33.3)	2 (33.3)
Master's/spec	5 (27.8)	1 (16.7)	4 (66.7)	–
PhD	1 (5.6)	–	–	1 (16.7)

After the analysis and processing of the data collected in FGI, these data were used in the second phase of the research in making the electronic questionnaire which resulted in a greater level of generalisation and quantification of the data.

¹¹ Marks are the following: 1. Very poor, 2. Poor, 3. Satisfactory, 4. Very good and 5. Excellent.

The Second Phase of Data Collection

The online survey was made in two versions of questionnaire: one for the students currently studying outside their country of origin, and the other for the students who had studies abroad but returned to their country of origin or moved to another country. Both these questionnaires were distributed in Serbian and in English, so there were 4 different questionnaires in total, i.e. one for each group of the respondents. The questionnaire for students currently studying abroad included 32 questions, while the questionnaire for returnees had one question more.¹² All these questions were of the closed type, with the additionally provided option of filling in one's own answer.¹³ The questionnaires included four Likert's scales with 36 opinions in total, as well as 5 assessment scales (Figure 1). The ten questions at the end of the questionnaires concerned socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The questionnaires involved 111 variables.

In addition to socio-demographic characteristics, the questionnaires also researched: professional identity (the respondents were, inter alia, asked to compare potential working conditions for their profession in the country of origin and country of studying); ethnic identity (how they present their country of origin to others, what having certain nationality, faith, language, citizenship, etc. means to them, how much they follow the situation in their country of origin); cultural identity (their attitude towards food, fashion, music, customs in the country in which they studied); spatial identity (assessing the differences between public spaces in the cities in which they had lived and those in which they were currently living...). Furthermore, the changes that occurred after going abroad were also researched (changes in one's attitude towards the lifestyle, family, friends, career, other cultures, etc.).

The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents from the second half of November 2023 to the end of January 2024, and this was the period in which the link for the online survey was active. The online collection of data was chosen due to the inability to realise this type of research in person – the respondents were international students that often resided outside the country and it was thus, first of all financially, impossible to organise the research in person. The data were collected via the Limesurvey platform, and subsequently transferred into Microsoft Excel.

¹² The respondents who had returned to their country of origin, stated the year of their return.

¹³ The offered answers, i.e. alternatives, were formed based on the data collected thus far, experience of the researchers, but they were primarily results of analysing the data collected during the FGIs.

A13. Please rate the aspects of life in the country where you study from 1 to 5 (1 – very bad, 5 – exceptional).

	1	2	3	4	5
The behaviour of the local population towards me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The behaviour of fellow students who came from other countries	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The behaviour of professors towards foreign students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Assistance the university provides to foreign students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Assistance provided by the state institutions to foreign students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Assistance provided by the faculty administration service to foreign students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Approachability of state institutions regarding student's suggestions and complaints	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Figure 1. Appearance of one question in the Limesurvey software

Characteristics of the sample: Application of an online survey frequently assumes problems with selecting the sample and identifying the persons who would participate (Стојшин, 2014), which also happened in this research. Namely, the lack of a representative sample or contact with the respondents resulted in uneven distribution of the respondents among the groups. After the database had been arranged, the respondents were distributed in sample groups in the following way: respondents from Serbia studying abroad (75 respondents) made 33.8% of the total number of the respondents who filled in the online survey; the share of Serbian students who had studied abroad but returned was 23.0% (51 respondents). The most numerous group was that of foreign students who were studying in Serbia, and they made 40.5% of the sample (90 respondents), and finally, the smallest number of the respondents belonged to the group of foreign students who had studied in Serbia, but they eventually returned to their country of origin – their share was mere 2.7% (6 respondents).¹⁴

After a control and discarding of the incomplete questionnaires, the total number of the respondents amounted to 222, divided into the four aforementioned groups.

Gender structure of the respondents was more balanced in this phase than in the FGIs, yet female respondents were once again more represented (57.8%) than male (42.2%) (Table 2). The respondents up to 30 years old made 70.8% of the total number of the respondents, while those older than 30 made 29.2% of

¹⁴ The low response rate in this group was expected, since these were foreign students who had returned to their countries of origin, so they were hard to contact.

the total sample (Table 3). The most numerous were the respondents who had spent one year studying abroad (Graph 1).

Table 2. Gender structure of the respondents

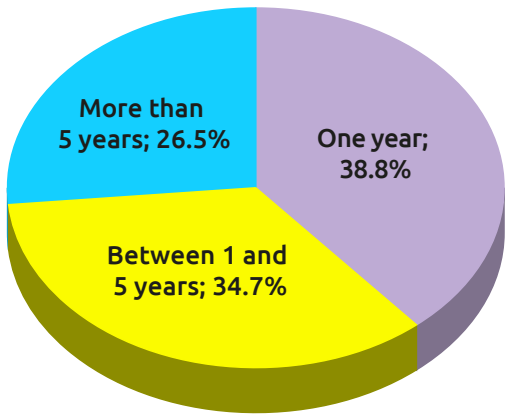
	Total	Male	Female
Total	222 (100.0)	89 (40.1)	122 (54.9)
Serbian students studying abroad	75 (33.6)	19 (8.6)	54 (24.3)
Serbian students who had studied abroad but returned to Serbia	52 (23.4)	21 (9.4)	29 (13.1)
Foreign students studying in Serbia	90 (40.5)	46 (20.7)	37 (16.7)
Foreign students who had finished their studies in Serbia and returned to their country of origin	5 (2.2)	3 (1.4)	2 (0.9)

Note: The difference up to 100% in all tables represents the missing answers

Table 3. Age of the respondents

Age	
18–19	5 (2.4)
20–24	78 (35.1)
25–29	63 (28.4)
30–34	46 (20.7)
Older than 35	19 (8.5)

Note: The difference up to 100.0% are respondents of unknown age



Graph 1. Duration of one’s stay abroad

Country of origin: The largest share of the foreigners who participated in the data collection were from the countries of Africa (14.9%) and Asia (11.3%). On the other hand, our students' destinations usually involved European countries¹⁵ (71.6% of the total number of Serbian students¹⁶), where Germany was the most popular. Among the total number of the participants of the second phase, 8.9% studied in two countries, while 2.7% studied in a number of countries.

Table 4. The country you were born in?

Total number of respondents	
Serbia	110 (49.5%)
SFRY	24 (10.8%)
Europe	<i>Totally 19 (8.6%)</i> Germany 5 (2.2%); Greece 4 (1.8%); United Kingdom 3 (1.3%); Italy 2 (0.9%); one respondent each Albania, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland and Poland.
Africa	<i>Totally 33 (14.9%)</i> Nigeria 8 (3.6%); Ghana 7 (3.1%); Equatorial Guinea 3 (1.3%); Two respondents each from Angola, South Africa, Zambia and Uganda; One respondent each from Egypt, Eritrea, Mali, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Togo and Eswatini.
Asia	<i>Totally 25 (11.3 %)</i> United Arab Emirates 5 (2.2%); Turkey 3 (1.3%); India 3 (1.3%). Two respondents each from Indonesia, Syria, Saudi Arabia; One respondent each from Iran, Hong Kong, Azerbaijan, Kuwait, Pakistan, Qatar, China and Russia.
Other	<i>Totally 11 (4.9%)</i> Vanuatu 3 (1.3%); Two respondents each from Suriname and the USA; one respondent each from Honduras; Cuba, Canada, Argentine.

Most of the respondents who participated in the second phase of the research assessed material situation of their family as satisfactory (57.8%), while 11.4% of the respondents assessed it as poor or very poor (Table 5).

¹⁵ Germany 23 (10.3%); Italy 11 (4.9%); Bulgaria 8 (3.6%); USA 8 (3.6%); Hungary 7 (3.1%); France 6 (2.7%); Holland, United Kingdom and Austria 5 each; Spain and Slovenia 4 respondents each; Switzerland, China, Czech Republic and Canada 3 students each; Belgium, Greece, Russia, United Arab Emirates 2 students each. One student studied in Sweden, Denmark and Croatia each.

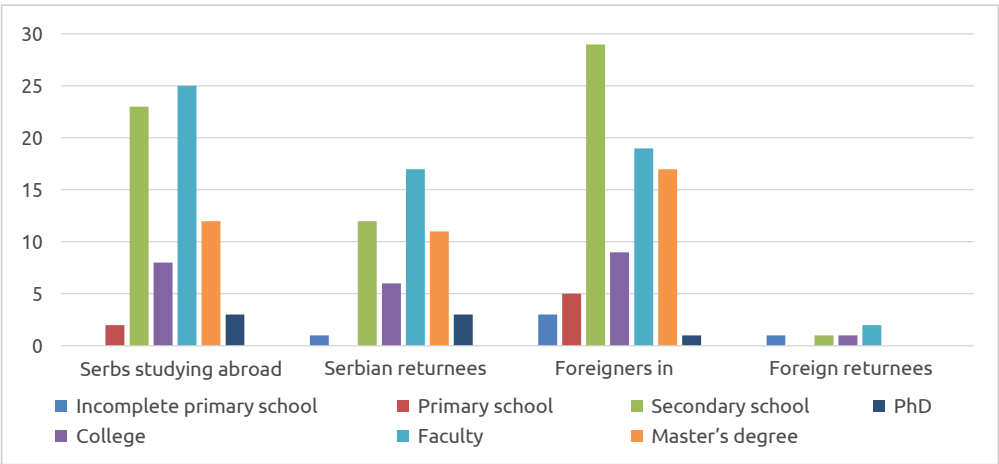
¹⁶ Both the returnees and those studying at the time of the research.

Table 5. Assessment of the respondents' material situation

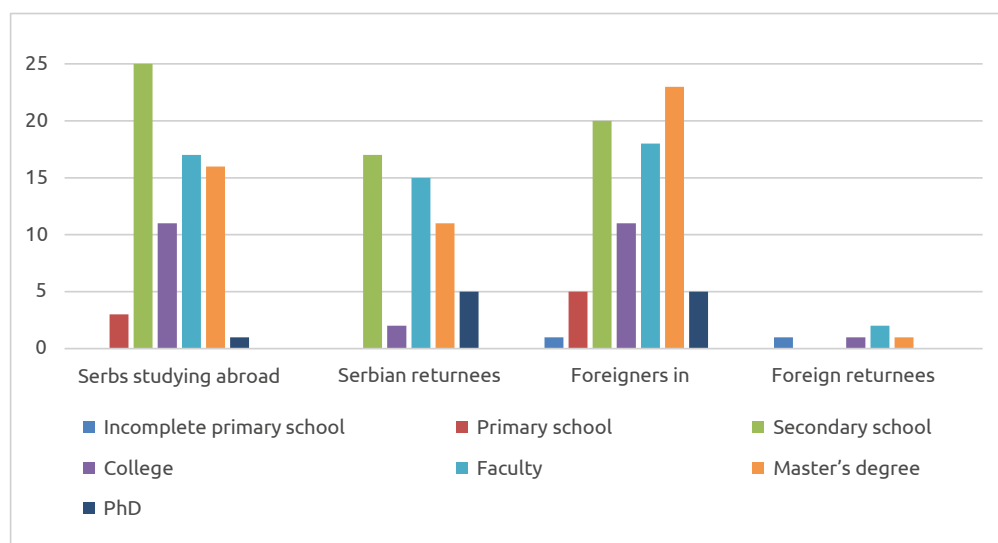
	Total	Very poor	Poor	Satisfactory	Very good	Excellent
Total	211 (100.0)*	3 (1.4)	21 (10.0)	122 (57.8)	53 (25.1)	12 (5.7)
Serbian students studying abroad	73 (34.6)	1 (0.5)	7 (3.3)	42 (19.9)	17 (8.0)	6 (2.8)
Serbian students who had studied abroad but returned to Serbia	50 (23.7)	–	6 (2.8)	26 (12.3)	14 (6.6)	4 (1.9)
Foreign students studying in Serbia	83 (39.3)	2 (0.9)	7 (3.3)	51 (24.2)	21 (10.0)	2 (0.9)
Foreign students who had finished their studies in Serbia and returned to their country of origin	5 (2.4)	–	1 (0.5)	3 (1.4)	1 (0.5)	–

Note: *Eleven respondents failed to provide an answer to this question.

Educational structure: The educational level of international students' mothers and fathers is important for further analysis. As far as the mothers are concerned, one third of the mothers of the foreigners who study or studied in Serbia finished secondary school (34.1% of the total number of foreigners), followed by the mothers who graduated from a faculty (23.9%). Only 1.1% of non-Serbian respondents have mothers with PhD, while among the Serbian respondents, there were 4.9% of such students. Among the international students in Serbia, there were 4.5% whose mothers did not finish primary school, while among the Serbian students, 0.8% had mothers who had not finished primary school (Graph 2). Mothers of the Serbian respondents had most frequently graduated from a faculty (34.1% of the total number of the Serbian respondents), followed by secondary school (28.5%).



Graph 2. The highest level of education of the mother, in %



Graph 3. The highest level of education of the father, in %

Among the fathers of Serbian students, the greatest share finished secondary school (34.1% of the total number of respondents from Serbia), followed by a faculty (26.0%). Among the foreigners, as well as among the Serbian students, the share of the fathers with master's and specialist degree was higher (24.1% of the total number of the respondents) than that of the mothers (19.0%) (Graph 3).

Regardless of all the efforts made by the researchers to get to as many respondents as possible that would fill in the online survey, we need to note that the sample was usually a "snow ball" or convenient, so these results could not be taken to address the entire population of international students. The sample consisted of 222 respondents, and due to uneven representation of all groups, the responses were usually analysed for the entire sample, referred to with the category of "international students".

The Third Phase of Data Collection

In order to be able to implement the third planned method in the research of international students' identity changes, that of qualitative interview, the basis for the interview was composed. The first group of questions concerned socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. This involved the very same questions incorporated in the online survey, followed by the questions of the respondents' place of origin (village/city, size of the settlement). This was followed by asking the question which had also been asked in the focus group interviews, that of "Who am I?" which points to the significance that the respondents gave to certain identities.

The second group of questions referred to the motives for migration, neglected in the earlier phases of the research due to the specific characteristics of the used methodology. The questions concerned the motives for selecting certain destination, motives to go abroad, as well as the role of the parents and wider family in making the decision. A portion of the questions referred to drawing parallels between the places in which they had lived and the place in which they studied; recognition of the flaws and positive sides of these locations; assessment of their satisfaction with the conditions and quality of life before and during the studies; analysis of the experience of residing abroad and the changes that occurred.

The third group of questions referred to institutional problems that the respondents encountered residing abroad; their assessment of institutional support on different levels (state/local level) as they arrived, during their stay and after the return. At the conclusion of this group of questions, the respondents were asked to provide their advice to future international students, faculties and professors, in order for the experience of future international students to be more positive.

The final group of questions involved future plans, where we were interested in what motivated them the most to stay abroad, or to return; what they had missed during their studying abroad and what they had gained; whether they were at an advantage compared to the students who studied in their own country; whether they thought of further migration, as well as what was crucial for them when they thought of their future place of residence. The qualitative interview was concluded with the question of how much and in what way they felt changed by studying abroad.

The interviews were realised in April 2024. Having processed the data collected with this method, the researchers classified and singled out the most frequent, typical answers. After the answer, or a part thereof, the following variables were provided: gender, age and the country in which the responded was studying or had studied, e.g. (w, 23, Germany). All the answers were given in their original form, without grammar revisions or corrections.

Characteristics of the sample: The sample was convenient, made of 19 respondents, 6 of which were men (31.6%), while 13 were women (68.4%). The average age of the respondents was 29.1, while the largest share of the respondents were between 30 and 34 years old (Table 6). This phase of the research was participated in by 13 respondents from Serbia¹⁷ and 6 foreign respondents.¹⁸ The qualitative interview, just like the FGIs, was not participated in by respondents from the fourth group, i.e. those who had studied in Serbia, but subsequently returned to their native country or moved on to another country, due to aforementioned reasons.

¹⁷ They (had) studied in Germany (4 respondents), Austria (2), Hungary (2), France (2), Taiwan, United Kingdom and United States (one respondent each).

¹⁸ The respondents came from Nigeria, Pakistan, United Kingdom, Cape Verde, Argentina and Albania.

Both parents of almost all of the foreign respondents (5) had university education, while with the Serbian respondents, we had equal share of parents with university and secondary school education.

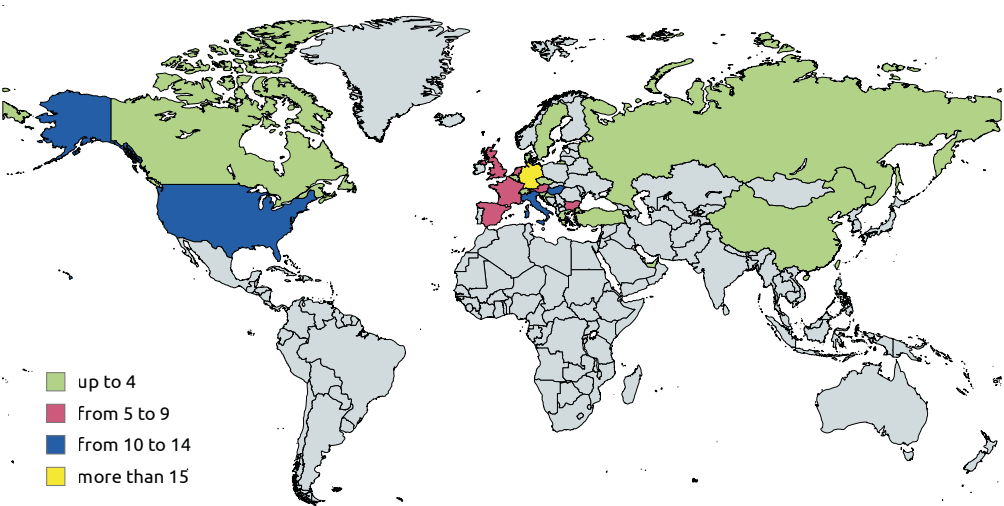
Though the answers cannot be fully generalised due to the small number of the respondents, we should note that the majority of the respondents reported that their material situation had been poor before going abroad, stating that they were “impoverished”, “hard up”, “parents both lost their jobs at the same time, I also didn’t work, so we were all living this utter horror”, or they stated that they had been financially supported by their parents during their studies.

Table 6. Age of the respondents

Age	
Total	19 (100.0)
20–24	3 (15.7)
25–29	7 (36.8)
30–34	8 (42.1)
Older than 35	1 (5.3)

* * *

Even though we did state where Serbian students studied, while explaining the characteristics of the sample used in every phase of the research, at the conclusion of this section addressing the research phases, we supply the map which shows where the most of the Serbian students study, while these data refer to the entire sample. Germany is the country in which the greatest number of our students studied, i.e. 20.0% of the total number of the respondents (Map 2).



Map 2. Where do Serbian students study?

DATA PROCESSING

As the very research draft was made by using triangulation of both the sample and the methods, triangulation was also used in data processing. The data received in the first phase of the research with focus groups were transcribed, then processed using the method of classification, i.e. thematic analysis. The data obtained through qualitative interviews in the third phase of the research, were also transcribed, then processed and analysed in the MAXQDA program, specialised in qualitative data. The same program was used for the analysis of the transcripts received from the focus groups.

During the coding of the qualitative data obtained from the FGIs and qualitative interviews, more than 10 categories were extricated. The demographic data were the same in all the phases of the research. The categories referring to the motives for migration and potential return to the country of origin, as well as to the future plans, are predominantly based on the results of the qualitative interview, while the remaining categories (cultural, spatial, professional and national identity) are based more on the results from the FGIs. The categories of social networks, migration experience, comparisons between the country of origin and country of reception are present in the results obtained by both these methods. However, it needs to be noted that a great number of the subcategories of the aforementioned categories, are present in the data obtained by applying both methods, so no clear boundary may be drawn. This means that, during the interviews, the respondents touched on various aspects of the researched problem. In the following lines, the categories and a couple of subcategories are singled out, in order to illustrate the manner of processing the data by means of the aforementioned program.

1. Demographic characteristics: age; place of birth; place of studying; material position before going abroad; siblings, spouses; level of education of the parents; field/discipline of studies; the highest level of education acquired abroad.
2. Motives for migration: “images” of the destination, positive and negative; attitude towards young people’s motivation for migration; reasons for migration and reasons for the selection of the destination; consideration of migration; role of the family, friends, colleagues when deciding on the migration; experiences of residing abroad, etc.
3. The way of life abroad: language and integration into a new environment; knowledge of a foreign language – language of the new environment; administration; relationship student/professor/university and comparison between the country of origin and country of destination; potential cooperation with the country of origin or return; conditions for studying and cost benefit; accommodation, infrastructure; domestic scholarship/

- international scholarship; information i.e. prior knowledge concerning the new environment and studies, etc.
4. Plans for the future: motives for staying abroad; motives for returning to one's own home country; about the students originating from the same country in the country of origin; benefits of studying abroad; what has been missed by studying abroad; ideal country/region/city for living and working; vision of the future place of residence; obstacles in returning to one's homeland; perceived advantages of studying abroad.
 5. Cultural identity: nostalgia – food, music, customs, family; new experiences in encountering a culture; previous conceptions about cultural similarities; cultural differences and professional obligations; language as a challenge and a problem, etc.
 6. Spatial identity: historical heritage as a part of an environment/space; cultural and sporting events; cultural monuments and institutions; comparisons between the environment/space of one's country of origin and country of destination, etc.
 7. Social networks and capital: importance of social networks; nationality of the network's members; network's durability; multinational networking; support in integration; membership of diaspora organisations, etc.
 8. Experience of migration: decision on migration; process of adapting; attitude of the native population to foreign students; perceived changes caused by the migration; thoughts of re-emigration.
 9. National identity: attitude towards one's own nation; attitude towards foreigners' attitude towards Serbs; foreigners' perception of Serbia and Serbs; origin as a part of one's own personal identity; holidays, etc.
 10. Sense of one's own identity: self-representation.
 11. Professional identity: relationships with colleagues; attitude towards one's profession; expectations of the profession; perceived professional changes, etc.
 12. Comparisons between the country of origin and country of destination: openness towards difference; social system; beliefs; social activism; attitude towards social community; infrastructure; leisure abroad; leisure in Serbia, etc.

The data collected by means of quantitative method (online survey) from 222 respondents, were systematised in Excel databases, and after all four databases had been combined¹⁹, the collected data were transferred in the SPSS program and processed accordingly.

¹⁹ A separate questionnaire, adjusted to the respondents, was made for each group, and this resulted in the creation of four Excel databases in total.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The complexity of the studied subject and the fact that it has been under-researched, as well as the lack of systematised and comprehensive data concerning the basic set of international students, led to the assumption which occurred already in the drafting phase that certain problems were bound to emerge during the research. The methodological obstacles that occurred during the realisation of the research project had different sources: first, the high level of abstraction of the basic research term of *identities and changes in identities* and difficulties in its operationalization; also, the obstacles arising from specific characteristics of the used data-collection methods and tools; finally, the obstacles arising from special characteristics of the sample.

Similarly, it was assumed that disadvantages of the proposed data-collection method would be overcome by using multitude of these, which proved to have been right. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, and later on, also data, the flaws that had occurred due to the specific methodology were mainly corrected, especially the problems with using an online survey. Most of the methodological problems that occurred in researching international student migration may also be characteristic of other research projects. Tables 7 and 8 contain an overview of the research phases, their advantages and disadvantages. These disadvantages were overcome in the aforementioned manner.

Table 7. Data collection phase

Method	Data collection tool	Sample
Focus group interview	Interview guide Questionnaire with demographic data	18 respondents (3 focus groups with 6 respondents each)
Online survey	Questionnaire	222 respondents
Qualitative interview	Interview guide	19 respondents

Table 8. Main advantages and disadvantages of the applied methods

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Focus group interview	The collected data used in creating the online survey; more in-depth acquaintance with the researched subject	Small number of the respondents, impossibility of the data generalisation
Online survey	Huge number of the respondents, quantification, i.e. possibility of generalisation of the responses	Problems in reaching the respondents with the experience of international migration
Qualitative interview	Correcting the flaws identified in the first two methods; acquiring a rich empirical material	Long period of time necessary for data collection

Regardless of different methodological challenges we encountered during the project, the quality and versatility of the data we acquired in the three research phases indicate that we have successfully overcome the challenges. The valuable findings of our research and its different aspects shall be presented in the following chapters.

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