# "I don't want my children to grow up there": Counter-Narratives to Migration by University Students in Ghana

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## Abstract

The turn in migration studies to broaden its scope beyond migrants themselves to also include prospective migrants – and even the society they live in – opens for a better understanding of migration. Despite mobile students from the Global South being a key feature of the globalisation of higher education, their voices are underrepresented and undertheorized in migration literature. Student narratives from the Global South can therefore offer new and valuable perspectives. This study contextualizes students' migration aspirations within a critical view of migration studies and global knowledge production and methodologically centres the students and their narratives. Students at two universities in Ghana were interviewed in focus groups about migration. Findings reveal diversity and contradictions: students speak about migration in simple and even ambiguous terminology suggesting a quotidian quality of the conversation, and the undeniably uncertain and ambiguous future. Students also harbour distinct views on migration connected to class and identity, including various reservations or even counter–narratives to migration such as concerns about racism and discrimination abroad, and the draw of family and culture at home. Additionally, the students in this study, similar to well–researched student migration narratives in the Global North, connect mobility to cultural exposure, enjoyment, and adventure.

**Keywords:** international student migration, migration theory, global knowledge society, racism, Ghana.

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## Résumé

Le virage des études sur la migration pour élargir champ d'application de celle-ci au-delà des migrants eux-mêmes afin d'inclure également les migrants potentiels – et même la société dans laquelle ils vivent – ouvre la voie à une meilleure compréhension de la migration. Bien que les étudiants mobiles des pays du Sud soient un élément clé de la mondialisation de l'enseignement supérieur, leurs voix sont sous-représentées et sous-théorisées dans la littérature sur la migration. Ainsi, les récits d'étudiants issus du Sud peuvent offrir des perspectives nouvelles et précieuses. Cette étude contextualise les aspirations des étudiants en matière de migration dans une vision critique des études sur la migration et de la production de connaissances mondiales et centre méthodologiquement les étudiants et leurs récits. Des étudiants de deux universités du Ghana ont été interrogés dans des groupes de discussion sur la migration. Les résultats révèlent la diversité et les contradictions : les étudiants parlent de la migration dans une terminologie simple et même ambiguë suggérant une qualité quotidienne de la conversation, et l'avenir indéniablement incertain et ambigu. Les étudiants ont également des points de vue distincts sur la migration liée à la classe et à l'identité, y compris diverses réserves ou même des contre-discours sur la migration tels que les préoccupations concernant le racisme et la discrimination à l'étranger, et l'attrait de la famille et de la culture à la maison. De plus, les étudiants de cette étude relient la mobilité à l'exposition culturelle, au plaisir et à l'aventure, à l'instar des récits de migration étudiante bien documentés dans le Nord global.

**Mots clés:** migration internationale des étudiants, théorie de la migration, société mondiale du savoir, racisme, Ghana.

## Introduction

Migration studies have, in recent times, expanded beyond migrants to include non-migrants and hence broadened the scope to voices not earlier heard. To have a fuller understanding of migration and the ability to migrate, mobility, prospective migrants and their aspirations or future plans are also of interest to the discourse (Carling, 2002, 2008; Carling and Schewel, 2018; De Haas, 2014). This opening of migration studies to include whole populations, not just migrants

in isolation, as well as ideas and discourses about migration, and not just borders crossed, have resulted in a transformation of the field of migration studies, and a productive conversation on both the reasons for, means of, and effects of migration.

This paper argues that in this moment in migration studies, the vantage point of students in the Global South, both as prospective students and friends and/or family members of migrants, can offer a much-needed new perspective on migration. I also note that students have not had a conceptual home in migration theory, except as transmigrants (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 2013; Gargano, 2009). While some migrants who at some point were students spend their lives continuously linking societies of origin and settlement, that is not true for all migrating students; hence the term transmigrant only covers a subset of experiences of migrating students. Furthermore, youth in the Global South are a fast-growing population, and within it, students are a distinct sub-group; this paper seeks to contextualize their mobility, centre their voices and language, and invite them into the meaning-making process of migration aspirations, or the lack thereof.

## Why study students from the Global South and their migration discourses?

Young people generally, including students, inhabit and are affected by the contemporary global reality – one of precarity but also resourcefulness. In this section, I discuss several relevant literatures: youth studies focusing on livelihoods, international student migration (ISM), literature focusing on economic motivations for migration, and to conclude the section, I discuss the lacunae in the literature and what set students apart from youth in general and thus motivates this study.

Youth studies have uncovered the global nature of the precarious situation for youth, for example: Mwaura's (2017) work on Kenyan-educated youth engaging in agriculture when graduate unemployment soars, Jeffrey and Young (2014) on male fixers in Uttar Pradesh in India with entrepreneurship as a survival strategy, and Brinton (2010) on the "lost generation" in Japan struggling in the wake of the financial crisis of the 1990s. Similarly, Forsberg's (2018) dissertation on negotiating education and work trajectories in Kerala, India and Northern Sweden showed that while different socio-spatial contexts affect the realization of aspirations, there are global normative discourses of "successful adulthood" describing education to work trajectories. From the UK, Pimlott-Wilson (2017) examines youth and their response to the changing neoliberal economy, and notions

economy, and notions of "success" and Boampong (2020) interviewed children with ties to Ghana on their aspirations after the financial crisis of 2007–2008.

Internationally, the growing subfield of migration studies called International Student Migration (ISM) is predominantly focused on British (Ahrens et al., 2010; Brooks and Waters, 2009; Findlay et al., 2010), Central-European (Ackers, 2005; Assirelli, Barone, and Recchi, 2019; Jensen and Pedersen, 2007; Lindberg, 2009; Murphy-Lejeune, 2003), North American (Alberts and Hazen, 2005) and, recently, to some extent, Asian (Verbik and Lasanowski, 2007; Xiang and Shen, 2009) students. While the ISM literature has described the enjoyable aspects of migration for students from the Global North as improving language skills and broadening horizons and experiencing other cultures, this perspective has not been prevalent for students from the Global South. Apart from some notable exceptions, discussed below, student migration from the Global South is generally not well researched (King and Raghuram, 2013).

Perspectives and narratives that are currently explored for students from the Global South often focus on economic reasons for migration (e.g., return on education), or particular sectors like health. Health professionals' migration is relatively well researched. For Ghana, Abuosi and Abor (2014) examined nursing students and found that the factors which positively influenced their migration aspirations were better educational opportunities and the fear of placement in rural areas. In the new economics of labour migration (NELM) literature, migration is seen as a joint venture between family members aiming to maximize returns and minimize risk (Stark and Taylor, 1991). Studies on students from the Global South focused the analysis on benefits of migration, including returns on education, either financially or in terms of social mobility, and include countries such as Bangladesh (Anthias and Siddiqui 2008), China (Waters, 2005) and Nigeria (Adesina, 2007). Even fewer studies cover south–south international student migration. Exceptions include a study on Sahrawi and Palestinian students in Libya and Cuba (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015), as well as a strand of scholarship looking at African students in China (Ho, 2017; Ngoie Tshibambe, 2012). These strands of research are overwhelmingly qualitative and have several interesting results for migration theory as a whole; I will highlight two. One, they point to "overlapping migration", that is, migration with several goals

such as educational, economic and safety. Secondly, they also ground migration aspirations in the geopolitical order. Hence, there are gaps within the ISM and NELM literatures and they need to include students from the Global South and south-south migration to be truly international.

Beyond what is also true for youth at large, the rationale of researching university students within a migration context are manifold. First, students are symbolically the future of their countries; therefore, whether they harbour migration aspirations or not matters. Second, students are a central asset in a knowledge society as they are often fee-payers in an increasingly privatized higher education market. Third, a student is often a trendsetter among youth in general as education gives them access to capital or necessitates capital, and is legally unique as students have their own categories of visas. Fourth, it has been recognized that students from the Global South have a higher ability to migrate than other groups from the Global South as they are sought after in the international labour market and constitute lucrative customers for higher educational institutions (HEI). Hence, university students are a unique group, both as a subgroup of youth in general and in terms of migration ability or mobility.

## Counter-Narratives from Students as Theoretical Development

Currently, we know little about what students from the Global South aspire to and if indeed they want to migrate and why. There is a need to challenge the theorisation around migration of students which either bundles them up with precarious youth in general or does not take into account the global order and the rise of the knowledge society where higher education prefaces the good life. Earlier migration scholarship bypassed talking to students themselves, but still centred "brain-drain" out of the Global South and saw becoming a student as a first step for (permanent) migration (Castles and Miller, 2003; Katseli, Lucas, and Xenogiani, 2006). Postcolonial geographer Raghurham (2013) turns the argument on its head and posits that until the early 2000s when student mobility regimes started changing under the "war on terror" banner, almost all migrants were engaged in studying in some form. Therefore "migration theorists need to extend existing analyses, which have primarily focused on the spatialities of migration, to take account of the spatialities of knowledge" (Ragurham, 2013, 138). Centring knowledge is key to decolonial theory today and studying students from the Global South and their migration aspirations fits in this context. In "resisting certain ways of seeing migration", we may examine contradictions rather than single truths (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Berg, 2018).

For migration theory in particular, Grosfoguel, Oso and Christou (2014) suggest it most often reproduces a northern-centric social science view where migrants are seen as "other" and theory crafted from afar. Decolonial theory aims to promote an unbiased study of cultures and communities affected by coloniality — distinguished from colonialism by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) as a "power structure [···] at the centre of the present world order" (2013, 11). The discourse came out of discontent with postcolonial theory (Go, 2013).

Further, it has been argued that a more general theory could be extracted from the precariousness of African youth as it is in no way a unique disposition; as has been shown above with examples from the literature, the context of youth is global (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Durham 2000). In its 2019 report, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation suggested African migrants to the Global North are predominantly educated youth: "it is about aspirations, not desperation" ("Africa's Youth: Jobs or Migrations?", 2019, p. 3). On the African continent, only a lucky few have access to higher education, as the average gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education on the African continent increased only marginally from 2013 to 2018 from 8.5 to 9.1 percent (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2020). Even though universities are expanding, the population growth, sometimes called "the Youth Bulge" due to its large share of youth, is growing faster (Lin, 2012).

Even so, the student population in the Global South and especially Africa is growing in absolute terms. Furthermore, they are an understudied group, especially when it comes to their own narratives around migration. Ghana as a case presents an opportunity to understand a representative student population in the Global South and Africa. Historically, as in other African countries and the Global South, political turmoil and structural adjustment programs have seen the flight of academics from Ghana in several waves (Manuh, 2005). Ghanaian universities were not able to meet their targets in terms of PhD output (Cloete, Maassen, and Bailey, 2015; Manuh, Gariba, & Budu, 2007). Hence, being a (graduate) student was often synonymous with being a traveller (King and Raghuram, 2013). Nevertheless, data shows most students do not migrate and many return. In a study of migration among top high-school leavers from Ghana, it was found 40 percent never migrated and 22 percent of migrants in the sample had returned at the time of the study (Gibson and McKenzie, 2012).

Therefore, I argue university students from the Global South, in this case Ghana, can provide insightful counter-narratives that can further extend the expansion already embarked on by migration studies.

## Analysing Global South Student Migration: Theory and Methodology

I was interested in determining how students talked about and created meaning around migration. Thus, I employed discourse analysis by paying close attention to what was said in conversation, what words were used and how. Discourse analysis assumes that it is through communication that meaning is created and maintained (Vanderstoep, 2009, p. 213). Further, my method is inspired by feminist and decolonial theory. I find there are similarities between the feminist and decolonial critique of established research methods:  the invisible male observer criticised by feminist Harding (1991) has its parallel in the decolonial theory eloquently summarized by Castro-Gomez (2007) as "the hubris of the zero point" (cited in Mignolo, 2010, p. 2). Both these viewpoints highlight that researchers are not objective and ahistorical, but rather located in a body, a space, and a time. Feminist stand point theory or the "constant interrogation of knowledge production, particularly who gets to write what about whom"(Noxolo, 2009) offers a useful set of tools such as recognising privilege, using personal language when interpreting (Shank, 2002, p. 10) and by sharing quotes in full as I discuss the results in the next section, I aim at being open, recognising that analysis is tentative or "recognizing, explicitly, that all explanations are partial, incomplete, and open to revision, or: that all theories are under-determining, leaving much room for alternative and competing explanations even of the same segment of reality"(Reiter, 2017, p. 142).  These critical ideas were useful to me as a European-born researcher discussing international migration with Ghanaian student informants.

In this article, I discuss student migration language and narratives based on research in focus groups of undergraduate students carried out at University of Ghana (UG), a major public university, and Ashesi University (AU), a small liberal arts college, both in Ghana. These two institutions were chosen not because they are comparable, but rather because they differ on many accounts (size, financing, location, history etc.). Thus, I could examine my questions in two disparate contexts and get access to a diverse range of respondents and narratives. Ethical clearance for the study had been sought and given. As migration is not a sensitive topic, I opted for not anonymizing the institutions. Students were recruited voluntarily through adverts on campus

and selected based on basic demographic data, e.g. level, sex, major – a purposeful sample – to be sure I covered varied opinions and backgrounds (VanderStoep and Johnston, 2009, p. 208). Students did not know each other beforehand and came from different departments.

Through semi-guided questions (see Appendix 1), themes and issues were explored in focus groups. Focus groups were used as they are conversations which ideally allow participants to steer topics and themes as well as react and interact with other participants, in all making the researcher less powerful or central. Hence, this data collection method suited my theoretical position. Alternative methods in student or youth migration studies have been championed with a similar narrative objective: "biographical practices" (Carlson 2011), "transnational social fields" (Gargano, 2009), and "mobility trajectories" (Geel and Mazzucato 2017), but then often in individual interviews which poses the risk of amplifying the researcher's influence compared to in contexts that differ less from everyday conversations such as an open-ended focus group discussion (Griffin, 2007, p. 23; Silverman, 2013).

Eventually, focus group discussions were carried out with a total of 29 students; 17 men, 12 women, 11 from Ashesi University and 18 from University of Ghana, see Table 1.

*Table 1: Focus Group Participants*

| University | Focus group | Men | Women | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| AU | FG 1 | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| | FG 2 | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Total AU | | 7 | 4 | 11 |
| | | | | |
| UG | FG 3 | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| | FG 4 | 4 | 3 | 7 |
| | FG 5 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| Total UG | | 10 | 8 | 18 |
| | | | | |
| Grand total | | 17 | 12 | 29 |

After an initial pilot focus group where the open-ended question guide was tested, and where students had a lot to say, adjustments were made to create smaller focus groups with about 5–7 participants. Two focus groups were held at the smaller Ashesi University and three at the bigger University of Ghana to be able to cover all year groups and a variety of majors. The ages of students participating ranged from 17 to 24 years; the average age was 20.54 years. In total, five focus group discussions were held between October 2013 and February 2014, recorded, transcribed and coded in the qualitative research software Dedoose[1].

In the next section, I present findings and have chosen to present longer quotes in-text to highlight that the understanding put forward here is just one of many possible analyses. When discussing migration aspiration with students, I sought to listen for diverse ideas toward the option to migrate, to problematize and question the commonly held ideas about migration like "everybody wants to migrate", or a focus on strictly economic reasons for migration, with results similar to what Fiddian-Quasmiyeh (2015) calls "overlapping migration" or several different goals with the migration aspiration.

## Characteristics of Ghanaian Students' Migration Aspirations

I did a thematic analysis looking for similar themes across the sample. Then the focus group conversations were analysed with discourse analysis to see how themes were discussed (Silverman, 2011). Through coding the data with qualitative software, I found several themes. I will discuss them below and provide quotes from the students, with signifiers for the students such as sex, age (17–24), level of study (100–400), and program of study. Following my methodological approach, I share full quotes to further emphasize the analysis I do is one of several possible analyses. Before I proceed, a more general discursive description on how students discuss migration will be presented.

### *Simple Quotidian Migration Terminology*

The terminology students used when discussing migration shows examples of strikingly simple language, which suggests that discourse around migration aspiration, and travel opportunities come up in everyday discussions.

> Student: I have been told by people that if you don't have a masters from outside the country, your CV is almost dead and I like to explore so that is another reason. I doubt I am going to stay here to do my masters.

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1    Dedoose is an online tool for qualitative and mixed methods data available at http://dedoose.com

Author: People often call "abroad" "outside". Why is that?
Another student: Because it is outside. [All laugh]

Some migration terminology that was specific to Ghanaian students is presented in Table 2.

*Table 2: Students' Migration Terminology*

| Term | Explanation | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Borga (verb) | Travel around (from "burger" – person living abroad; many Ghanaians migrated to Germany and Hamburg in the 1970-80s) | "Just borga and you come back " |
| Get bounced (verb) | Get visa application denied | "Someone who does not have any reason for going, he might be bounced" |
| Go and come (verb) | Travel and return (unclear duration) | "I think I will go and come", "Maybe five years, going and coming, because I like to travel" |
| Outside (noun) | Abroad | "I had interaction with someone from the American Embassy and they said if you want to go to any school outside", "even if I don't study outside, I want to be in a place where I will learn new things" |
| Over there (noun) | Abroad | "I don't really like vegetables so thinking about some of the things I will be eating over there", "They may travel for pleasure but not migrate over there" |
| There (noun) | Abroad | "There are more opportunities there" |
| Travel (verb) | Travel/migrate | "For me parents play a major role when it comes to traveling" |

*Note: The examples are taken from the focus group discussions*

Going "outside" is similarly casual to Adesina's (2007) Nigerian concept of "checking out", something she construes as "an euphemism for leaving the country not as a result of indigence but as a matter of or in search of prestige and, or, comfort" (p.1). In comparison, the Ghanaian students' terminology seems to be less value-laden. However, by not making use of distinctive conceptualizations – or indeed choosing to employ ambiguous concepts – the difference becomes blurred between migrating, travelling and "going and coming". I argue that the language is at the core of the issue of student migration and that the clouded terminology points to much uncertainty around student migration and migration aspirations. Possibly, that is why these issues are best captured in everyday, vague, overlapping, and interchangeable terminology.

### Ambivalent Aspirations

The students expressed keen interest in talking about migration, but also immediately problematized and conditioned their aspirations. As described in Table 2, the language for discussing migration is simple and an expression like "going outside" or "going there" was often employed.

> For a student in Ghana when you talk about migration it means going from a third-world country to, if I should say, a middle-income country, this is something everyone wants to experience. For a student going outside to study is one thing [that] is fun. Everyone wants to do it.
> – *Male, 20 years, level 200, Medicine*

> Yeah, I think that also is because even as we are students here, most of us have aspirations for the future. And then some friends, like she said in our class, they would really love to be working outside so based on what they've also heard about the place and what others have told them… you are sometimes enticed and then we would be like 'that would also be a great idea if I get the opportunity to go outside'.
> – *Male, 21 years, level 200, Nursing*

> I will say that sometimes some of us think that we shouldn't go there to work because our country is a developing one and to make our country a better place for the generations to come, we all must get involved…I have never thought of going to work there…The plan is to come back to the country.     – *Male, 22 years, level 300, Political Science*

From the first quote that suggests "everybody wants to do it [going abroad to study]" and the second that friends explore migration as "a great idea", we can see how students express diverging views on the desirability of the migration option. The third quote expressed a relatively widely held assertion among the students that migration, while desirable for the individual, was less desirable for the nation's development. All three students distinguish between going abroad to work and going abroad to study. Migration is in both cases framed as an "experience" or "opportunity" rather than a one-way ticket, suggesting a circular and even ambivalent approach rather than simplistic enthusiasm.

### Strong Reservations to Migration

Another theme was reservations the students held against the migration option. Here family, culture and morals of home were important, but some students also shared more of an identity critique of "everybody" wanting to migrate and defended a wish to individually make up one's mind:

> I don't want my children to grow up there, maybe it might be the ideology thing you were talking about. Watching movies, looking at the way things are going now I really don't think I will want to raise my children in such an environment. I prefer them to be where my mother will watch them.
> *–Female, 20 years, level 200, Business Administration*

> It is like everyone is swimming this way and I am not.
> *– Male, 20 years, level 200, Computer Science*

> Everybody likes traveling, "I want to go abroad, I want to study abroad", they are always praising abroad but what is there? Everyone is going there, I don't want to go. Like what you said, everyone is saying I want to go there so I want to stay here. I just want to stay here because I don't want to go there because everyone is going there...I just want to go there and have fun; have a vacation, shopping and come back to Ghana and let everyone know that I can go anywhere I want to not to just go and live there. It is something I have always thought of. I think it is more fun to be just travelling, "I went to New York, I went to Paris".
> *– Female, 20 years, level 200, Business Administration*

Assumptions about the Global South such as "everybody wants to leave", or framing of the issue as "brain-drain" have shaped migration theory leading to many attempts at measurements of these potential migrant flows. Carling and Schewel (2018) catalogue seven typologies of survey questions on migration aspiration or related concepts from many more studies and polls from the Gallup World Poll (GWP) to one-off research surveys.  Such singular ideas obscure the diversity of students' realities. When considering future children and their upbringing, the value of culture emerges as a triumphing factor not to migrate or at least to hurry back. Further, students express wanting to be different by not migrating and critique the naïve notion that life is better elsewhere. In addition to having reservations based on individuality and identity, tangible problems with the migration option were another theme. Below I will discuss fear of discrimination and racism, as well as negative experiences abroad.

### Awareness of Discrimination and Racism

Some students expressed worry about discrimination or racism in destination countries. Students had both examples of discrimination or racism and used such language to describe the events, but there were also more philosophical and reflexive conversations of how racism affects migration to the Global North or not.

> A friend of mine went to France one year abroad and she said that they asked her that do you guys sleep on trees and I was like "Aaaahhh!!  How do you ask that?" I think it is really unfair because when they come here, we treat them nicely so if I go there, I think I will be really heartbroken…I hear some places they still discriminate against Africans and I don't want anyone to do that.
> – *Female, 20 years, level 200, Psychology and Theatre Arts*

> I hear Italians are racists, but scores of Ghanaians go to Italy because it is outside Ghana. So, I think racism is a factor people consider but it doesn't stop them. It is just one of those things you have to deal with. It is like getting a passport.
> – *Male, 24 years, level 400, Computer Science*

> My uncle told me of an experience years ago where he got ill, and he was taken to the hospital and they were confining him because they said he had brought a disease from Africa. I think it was malaria and they weren't too conversant with it, so they put him in a secluded place as though if he touches you, you get infected with malaria. It took a while for people to adjust to him. It might be there in little bits...
> – *Female, 22 years, level 400, Business Administration*

> I am Swiss Ghanaian. So here I am considered to be a white man, there I am considered to be a black man. It is a very strange feeling, but you get used to it over time. But what you don't get used to are certain incidents when people treat you a certain way. In abroad (sic!) you need your ID card a lot, so when you are treated in a certain way and you don't really mind because you are used to it and then they ask for your ID and they look at the card and they recognize you are Swiss and they apologize ...Why should it be that I need that citizenship for you to completely accept me?
> *–Male, 21 years, level 100, Undecided Major*

Answering the question of why a majority of people in a region with less economic opportunity are not migrating, fears and reservations about migration, serves as a piece of the puzzle. The relatively new focus on migration aspirations has opened up migration studies to also include the people who do not migrate, with the rationale that they also play a role in the migration ecosystem. Taking reservations into consideration, we should distinguish between migration aspiration and mobility.

## *Reflecting on Negative Experiences Abroad*

Some students reflected upon the negative aspects of living abroad. Friends' and family members' experiences of living abroad, news from unstable countries, and personal experiences:

> I spent a year doing an exchange program and I went to Washington...It wasn't so pleasant because it was my first time, I went there alone, I wasn't with parents. I had to live

with a foster family and they didn't have any child. I was like an only child and I didn't really have a lot of friends, I was now getting to know people. It was fun though, but the adjusting was quite difficult. I had always dreamed of migrating permanently outside the country because of the movies I have watched, but [getting] a first-hand experience, I realized it was quite different in movies than in real life situations there.

<div align="right">

– *Female, 19 years, Level 300, undecided major*
</div>

I think for me, I have also realized that some students might not like the idea of migrating outside because of what is happening outside now. Even the foreign trend is not playing a part, because for what is said of Ukraine, and now there is political instability there. So, what if I get there, a foreigner who does not know any part of Ukraine, the people there see me and start to hurt me. Because of that insecurity, some students may not like to migrate if conditions are favourable here.

<div align="right">

– *Male, 21 years, level 200, nursing*
</div>

Student: I have a friend who is there, and in Ghana here, he wasn't the cool type. If I should say, I am a very cool guy so when we started moving together, I think he got something from me, so he was cool and OK but since he is gone there, everything has gone… I mean he has even gone above what he was doing previously.

Author: Can you give me some examples: what has happened to him?

Student: But now, he is partying, and I don't think he is studying very well, but when he was here in Central University, he was doing well.

<div align="right">

– *Female, 21 years, Level 200, nursing*
</div>

From the focus group discussions, it seemed like negative experiences abroad, both self-experienced and those of others, had an impact on students. The first quote paints an image of acute loneliness, a vivid contrast between what you see on film and what is the reality. The second quote discusses the

politically unstable situation in Ukraine, a country that was at the time of the focus groups actively recruiting students enrolled in health programs in Ghana (Hallberg Adu, 2014). A third quote discusses loss in social standing and risks of being a student abroad, here distractions of partying and losing one's way. The continued and strengthened interconnectedness of the world, further propelled by the internet and social media which students engage in, often daily, makes possible a heightened awareness of negative realities abroad.

### Lower Educated "Othering"

When investigating students' migration discourses the focus was on determining how students discuss migration, if at all, and what demographic group among students was more likely to stay or migrate. The focus group discussions revealed that all students deliberate and consider migration; however, students could not agree on what group among students is more likely to migrate. Ultimately, they rather suggested the most likely to migrate were not students at all, but rather lower-educated individuals. I will discuss that further below.

Students juxtaposed themselves to lower-educated individuals who were portrayed as having stronger aspirations to migrate than highly educated individuals like themselves – I construe this as a form of "othering" building on Saïd (1978). Students here discuss why students as a group are not very interested in migrating internationally.

> A higher-income family will have a stronger tie [to Ghana] in my opinion. A lower- income family, anything goes for them. So as far as the person is even going to Accra to make money for them it is fine and if the person is going outside Ghana, it is ultimate.
> *– Male, 24 years, level 400, Computer Science*

> I think it is the lower class [who will be more likely to migrate] because if you go to a place like Kumasi, a very small town there, everyone wants to leave the country.
> *– Female, 19 years, level 300, Undecided Major*

> My perception on those who want to migrate is they don't really know what the world out there is like. So, they have this perception that everything there is set-up...you can easily make it through life
> *–Male, 22 years, level 400, Psychology and Information Studies*

> For example, if you are a cleaner and you just clean you will not live comfortably [in Ghana], but if you are outside and you just clean two hours a day you are able to take care of yourself and your apartment. I think it is the people who have nothing to lose [who are likely to migrate].
> — *Female, 19 years, level 200, Medicine*

The students brought up the issue of class and how it plays into migration decisions. The quotes above show that students in Ghana want to set themselves apart from individuals who are more "desperate" for migration, and as individuals who have more opportunities, (see, for instance, the narrative about the cleaner with "nothing to lose"). In the migration literature for West Africa, research often focuses on the largest flows of youth, ie. internal migration. For Ghana, Abdul-Korah, 2011; Jennishe, 2018; Langevang and Gough, 2009; Martin, 2007; Ungruhe, 2010 have captured the migration strategies of youth, but there has not been much work carried out on more affluent groups such as tertiary students. A Nigerian study by Adesina (2007) is an exception which finds that Nigerian students see migration as connected to social mobility and status. In this study, Ghanaian students seem to say ambition to migrate should be moderate for it to lead to increased social status. Importantly, Ghanaian youth engage in other strategies than migration to connect to the world, for instance, adopting the locally acquired foreign accent (LAFA) or engaging with diaspora music styles such as hip life (Oduro-Frimpong, 2009; Shipley, 2013; Shoba, Dako, and Orfson-Offei, 2013). Further research could provide comparisons of affluent groups such as students across countries and regions.

### Expectations of Exploration and Enjoyment

As discussed, the discourse on migration for students in the Global South often presupposes an economic/practical slant to their migration. Quite the opposite for students from the Global North, the ISM discourse points to the exploration and enjoyment of studying in a country other than your country of origin. I suspected that students in Ghana felt the same, although this has not been captured in the literature. In the focus group discussions, I found ample evidence that exploring the world and enjoying are key objectives for anyone wanting to go abroad.

> You want a new place, a new atmosphere, a new way of doing things. When you are going outside the country maybe you have a stereotypical mindset. So maybe you want to know

things will be done. As young people we like to explore and know a lot more about the world.

*– Female, 19 years, level 100*

For me, it is work experience or enjoying the world, seeing other places of the world that you haven't seen before.

*– Male, 22 years, level 200*

Recently, [among] friends, we were talking, and we intend to do some traveling when we finish with university. We have these three months break before service and we were thinking we will just borga as the word is, come back to do our [national] service and if later we want to do our masters outside, we go and do that.

*– Male, 22 years, level 400*

That migration is only a "money matter" has perhaps been disrupted before; however, with decolonial glasses on, the optimism of Ghana's youth and their honest curiosity about the world, "explore" and "enjoying the world", a willingness to challenge stereotypical mindsets suggests that migration aspiration, at least initially, is less about finances and perhaps more about curiosity.

The last quote here suggests that the "gap year", or a year out to enjoy life in an unproductive manner such as backpacking, is something the well-to-do youth in Ghana engage in, but for a shorter period. In the quote, the student suggests the time to do this is between one's graduation and the beginning of the mandatory one-year national service. The term for discussing travelling here is "borga" from "burger" – a slang term for a Ghanaian living abroad/living a transnational life perhaps partly in Hamburg, discussed in depth by Martin (2007). However, here it is used as a verb and not a noun (see Table 1 for a comprehensive discussion on migration terminology).

## Conclusions

In this article, I have argued that narratives of university students from the Global South, here Ghana, can be productively used to rethink migration studies in the following ways.

The language used for discussing migration and critiques of the migration option suggest that students discuss migration in language that is simple, even to the point of being ambiguous, hinting at both the casual and quotidian, but perhaps also to the uncertainties that surround international mobility and the future more generally.

While a majority of students consider international migration, a share of them instead expressed strong aspirations not to migrate based on a mix of external, family and cultural reasons showing counter−narratives to commonly held assumptions about migration aspirations. Reservations include valuing the African identity and customs at home, fear of discrimination and racism and other negative experiences encountered personally or by family and friends. Perhaps the strengthened interconnectedness of the world through the internet and social media also creates channels for transmitting problems abroad to friends and family back home. This critique of the migration option is an important finding that highlights how university students and their migration narratives can in some way decolonize migration studies. Instead of focusing only on what the potential migrant wants or gets, my findings also include counter−narratives of what informants value and do not want to give up (like family, safety and respect) and thereby bring notions of what migrants perhaps more generally have to give up in their quest to migrate.

Students in this study suggested lower−educated individuals have a stronger aspiration to migrate than highly educated individuals like themselves −− I construe this as form of "othering" to borrow from Saïd (1978). That is, students acknowledge their own agency and class belonging and try to conceptualize themselves as separate from other groups in society, and perhaps justifiably so, as students often have more resources and better prospects at legal migration. Further, students in Ghana strongly align with the international student migration (ISM) discourse in which students in the Global North understand migration beyond economic benefits, and in terms of exploring and enjoying the world. For instance, the Ghanaian students discussed going abroad in a period akin to a "gap year". However, migration studies have not adequately recognized this discrete group of students as prospective migrants in the Global South, perhaps as it traditionally has been small both numerically and as a share of the population.

Finally, as more youth in the Global South become students, what they say about migration and how they say it is significant: a simplistic migration language suggests an ever-present option of migration for this group, but their deliberations also highlight the geopolitics of migration with its characteristic inequality and diversity, both within populations and countries and between them. By centring students from the Global South and their often critical or ambivalent narratives, a more holistic understanding of the migration option inclusive of their meaning-making of migration can be achieved. Literatures which earlier have sought to broaden the understanding of migrations include questioning the "everybody wants to go abroad"-narrative in Morocco (Latif Sandbaek, 2007), suggesting Afropolitanism as an identity (Selasi, 2005) or finding "overlapping migrations" of economic, personal and cultural goals with the migration venture (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015). This study aims to add to that body of work by centring the voices of university students in Ghana and hearing their ambivalence, reservations and indeed counter-narratives to migration. The student whose view gave name to this paper, "I don't want my children to grow up there," continued with centring the older generation's role in the Ghanaian family, "I prefer them to be where my mother will watch them," thereby shedding light on the values of home juxtaposed to the meaning-making and difficult choices of prospective migrants.

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## Appendix 1: Focus group questions

1. Who is more likely to aspire to migrate? To "go and come"? To stay? Why?
2. What actors influence the student's stand on the "migration option"?
3. What are the steps of migration for a student?
4. Do Ghanaian students have reservations about the migration option? I also hoped students would share their personal aspirations and thereby broaden my understanding of migration aspirations.