Central and Eastern European Migration Review
Received: 22 February 2023, Accepted: 13 November 2023
Published online: 17 November 2023
Vol. 12, No. 2, 2023, pp. 73–97
doi: 10.54667/ceemr.2023.20

Albanian Students Abroad: A Potential Brain Drain?

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Since 1991, Albania has become a fertile terrain for the study of migration and its relationship to development. One aspect of the country's intense and diverse experience of emigration which has received less attention is the movement of its students into higher education abroad. To what extent does this student emigration constitute a potential brain drain? We answer this question via a mixed-method research endeavour consisting of an online survey (N=651) of Albanian students enrolled in foreign universities and follow-up in-depth interviews (N=21) with a sample of the survey respondents. The survey and interviews were carried out in 2019–2020. The survey collected data on students' social and academic background, reasons for going abroad to study, life in the host country, attitudes towards returning to Albania and perceived barriers to return. Half of the respondents do not intend to return immediately after graduating. The remainder have a more open or uncertain mindset, including 30 per cent who say they will return only after a period spent working or doing further studies abroad. Those who intend to return, either sooner or later, do so out of a combination of family ties, nostalgia and wanting to 'give something back' to their home country. However, the barriers to return are perceived as formidable: low pay, lack of good jobs, corruption and a general feeling that 'there is no future' in Albania. The scale of loss of young brains is thus potentially considerable and a major policy concern for the future of the country.

Keywords: Albania, student emigration, brain drain, development, corruption

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Introduction

Due to the scale of emigration over the past three decades, Albania has been described as 'a country on the move' (Carletto, Davis, Stampini and Zezza 2006) and as 'a laboratory for the study of migration and development' (King 2005). Since the country opened up to the outside world after the collapse of the long-entrenched communist regime in the early 1990s, a 'stock' of Albanians living abroad has accumulated which is equivalent to around 40 per cent of the population resident in Albania.[1] After three decades, this migration is still ongoing, albeit with a changing profile – less a migration driven by poverty, desperation and protest, as it was in the 1990s, and more, nowadays, a structural feature of Albanian society, affecting particularly the younger and more educated components of the population (King and Gëdeshi 2020).

One aspect of Albania's changing experience of migration which has received less attention is the movement of students to pursue higher education abroad. Despite the existence of public universities in all major urban centres (Tirana, Shkodra, Elbasan, Durrës, Korça, Vlora and Gjirokastër), as well as a recent expansion of private and franchised institutions of higher education, mainly in Tirana, Albania has one of the highest rates of 'exporting' its students in Europe. We aim to unpack the phenomenon of Albanian student emigration, both to explore its main characteristics (motivations, courses of study, destination countries, plans for return to Albania etc.) and to tease out the wider implications of this movement. We deploy two main research instruments: an online survey, answered by 651 Albanian students studying abroad, and follow-up interviews with 21 such students. Given our key finding that large numbers of students do not intend to return to Albania, we suggest that this loss of highly educated young people constitutes a putative brain drain to be added to the already-studied brain drain of PhD-holders (Gëdeshi and King 2021).

Whilst 'international student migration' and 'brain drain' are not the same thing and, in fact, have spawned largely separate literatures so that the two phenomena are rarely linked, one of the functions of our paper is precisely to make that connection. We do so for two reasons. First, the notion of brain drain is often used in Albania when referring to the widespread desire of highly educated young people, including students, to leave the country (Gëdeshi and King 2021; Trimçev 2005). Second, we qualify the term by adding 'potential': if the students who are studying abroad do not (intend to) eventually return, then their emigration indeed turns into a brain drain.

The paper develops as follows. The next section reviews key literature on international student migration to set the context for the Albanian case. Then, we specify a number of questions pertinent to characterising and explaining Albanian student migration, including students' plans for the future. The subsequent section outlines the two research techniques used to collect empirical data. The longest part of the paper presents our findings, divided into sections dealing with individual research questions. We conclude the paper by summing up and discussing some policy implications.

International student migration: contextualising the Albanian case

International student migration (henceforth 'ISM') was recognised as a significant component of global migration only since about 2000. On the whole, student migrants, often referred to as 'mobile students' or 'international students' rather than as migrants *per se*, have not been seen as a 'problem' – unlike asylum-seekers, so-called illegal migrants or some categories of somatically, culturally and socio-economically 'different' labour migrants, who have been the target of exclusionary and racist attitudes and policies by host societies. Students, by contrast, are generally seen as desirable migrants who move to enrich their personal human capital, after which they would either return to their home country or, if they remained in their chosen host

country, would contribute to its high-skilled workforce. This sanitised view of ISM as an unproblematic 'good thing' needs to be nuanced; we do this later.

In the last two decades, the literature on ISM has grown rapidly. Several important books have been published (*inter alia*, Bilecen 2014; Brooks and Waters 2011; de Wit, Agarwal, Said, Sehoole and Sirozi 2008; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2022; Gürüz 2011; Murphy-Lejeune 2002; Van Mol 2014; Waters and Brooks 2021) alongside a number of special issues of journals (see Bilecen and Van Mol 2017; King and Raghuram 2013; Riaño, Van Mol and Raghuram 2018) as well as a dedicated journal, the *Journal of International Students*, published since 2011. As far as we are able to tell, none of this established literature pays any attention to Albania. We do, however, note a growing interest in ISM from European post-socialist countries to the 'West' (Chankseliani 2016; Genova 2016; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2022; Holloway, O'Hara and Pimlott-Wilson 2012; Lulle and Buzinska 2017; Marcu 2015; Mosneaga 2012; Wilken and Dahlberg 2017).

The literature on ISM displays two contrasting approaches: a statistical/geographical one, mapping and quantifying the movements of students globally and in different parts of the world such as Europe; and a more socio-anthropological perspective, focusing on students' motivations, perceptions, experiences, identities and future plans. Our study mainly follows the latter approach, although we are also concerned to briefly portray the scale and patterns of Albania student migration as contextual data.

Table 1. Albanian students abroad by host country, 2017

Country	No.	%
Italy	10,364	59.4
Greece	1,206	6.9
Turkey	989	5.7
Germany	886	5.1
USA	824	4.7
France	550	3.2
Austria	364	2.1
Romania	294	1.7
UK	272	1.6
Bulgaria	242	1.4
Other countries	1,457	8.4
Total	17,448	100.00

Source: UNESCO, Institute of Statistics, Global Flow of Tertiary Level Students (http://unesco.org/en/uis-studnet-flow).

How, then, to explain the destination pattern for Albanian student migration? Table 1 presents UNESCO data for Albanian students in their 10 most popular destinations. According to Börjesson (2017), global patterns of ISM follow three principles. The first is geographical proximity. Students wanting to study abroad will, other things being equal, opt for destinations which are relatively close in order to economise on travel costs, facilitate return visits home and, perhaps also, minimise cultural difference. Albanians' preference for countries in Europe, especially nearby Italy and Greece, supports this principle, with 85 per cent studying in an EU country. The second principle is that students move from lesser- to more-developed countries in order to access higher quality and more prestigious institutions and educational systems. Again, the Albanian data support this proposition. Albanian universities are perceived as inferior to those in Western Europe and the United States. Börjesson's third principle is that students move internationally along channels corresponding to previous colonial relations, especially as reflected by language, educational systems and culture. Certainly, this holds for the former colonies of the UK, France, Spain and Portugal. For Albania, the principle is less applicable, except insofar as there was a quasi-colonial relationship between pre-communist Albania and

Fascist Italy. More recently, in the later communist years and in post-communist times, the popularity of Italian TV channels and their cultural impact has created a kind of neo-colonial relationship (Mai 2003). Italian TV and other social media continue to shape young Albanians' 'geographical imagination' of the 'West' as a desirable place to live, study and work (Mai 2001; cf. also Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2021, 2022: 52–87).

There is a fourth principle, not mentioned by Börjesson but relevant to the Albanian case. This is the principle that 'students follow migrants'. The fact that Italy and Greece head the table for Albanian students' destination countries is related not just to geographical and cultural proximity but also to these countries hosting the largest communities of Albanian migrants, dating from the 1990s. Hence, many Albanian families have relatives in one or both of these countries who can offer accommodation and other forms of help to their student kin coming from Albania.

We can also interpret the Albanian case through the broader conceptual frames that have been applied to ISM (see Findlay 2010; King and Findlay 2012; Raghuram 2013). First, ISM can be set within the linked processes of globalisation and the marketisation of higher education. Increasingly, national university systems are harmonised in order to facilitate international academic cooperation and mobility, and this has tended to go hand-in-hand with systems of ranking and prestige in which countries and their higher education institutions compete with each other on the European and world academic stage (Findlay, King, Smith, Geddes and Skeldon 2012).

Second, migrating students can be seen as a subset of high-skilled migration (Mosneaga 2010), albeit the large literature on highly skilled migrants makes only passing reference to students, probably because the latter are not thought of as possessing (yet) the necessary high levels of skills and professional expertise. In this line of thinking, international students are a kind of proto-high-skilled category. They are *en route* to acquiring a high-skilled status and therefore soon to be subject to the career-enhancing migratory trajectories that high-skilled migrants follow, moving to places where their qualifications and talents are most needed and/or best rewarded.

Here, however, comes a dilemma: where highly trained international students are most needed (e.g. in their home countries) may not be the place where they can be most highly rewarded financially (in high-income countries in Europe or North America). Thus, we can regard Albanian ISM as an incipient brain drain if most students end up staying abroad after the completion of their studies. This can be interpreted as pernicious because the costs of the students' upbringing (food, clothing, housing, socialising and educating up to the threshold age of higher education) are borne by the (relatively poor) country of departure, whilst the (richer) country of destination benefits from this early investment in the production of brainpower. Very few students move from more- to less-developed countries for their higher education; indeed Albania's student migration is largely oneway-traffic out of Albania.

Thirdly, it has been argued that internationally mobile students represent a privileged migratory elite – actually, an elite within an elite, given that, in most countries, university study is mainly a trajectory for students from better-off families (Waters 2012). Not just for the students, but also for their parents and wider families, pursuing higher education abroad for the younger generation enhances social status, especially if the students enrol in what are regarded in prestigious or even 'world-class' universities (Waters 2006).

The simplistic view of the international student as 'a privileged individual from a relatively well-heeled background' needs to be revised (King and Raghuram 2013: 134), even if, as we shall see, the generalisation does hold true for Albania. Several more-recent studies show a much more diversified pattern, including cases where students from poorer family backgrounds struggle to make ends meet and to progress their lives. Rather than being welcomed as 'unproblematic' sojourners, international students from certain origins are seen as less desirable and are subject to racialisation and other forms of exclusion (see, for example, Fong 2011; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2022; Jiang 2021; Nada, Ploner, van Mol and Araújo 2023).

Researching Albanian ISM: key questions

How do the main themes in ISM theory and literature outlined in the previous section translate to the Albanian context? We nominate eight key questions.

4. How can we account for the large scale of student migration from Albania?
5. What are the main reasons Albanian students give for deciding to study abroad?
6. To what extent is studying abroad circumscribed by 'class' and family socio-economic background?
7. Which countries do Albanian students choose to study in, and why?
8. Which programmes of study do Albanian students opt for abroad, and why?
9. How do Albanian students evaluate their study-abroad experience? In particular, what do they perceive as the main benefits of studying abroad, especially in relation to their future careers?
10. What are the students' plans for the future: stay abroad in their current country of study; return to Albania, either sooner or later; or move on elsewhere?
11. Given the likelihood that many students will not return, what are the consequences and policy implications of this putative brain drain for Albania?

We attempt to provide answers to these questions via a mixed-methods approach, described in the next section.

Methods

This research derives from a wider-scale project on Albanian students and their perceptions and experiences of studying abroad.[2] For the present paper two research instruments provide the bulk of the data utilised.

The first was an online survey of Albanian students studying abroad for either a bachelor's or taught master's degree. This survey was carried out between May and November 2019, just before the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted students' ability to travel and study abroad. The survey sample was compiled using contact addresses from previous research projects, personal networks and social media platforms such as Linkedin and Facebook. In an ideal research world, these access points are not ideal platforms for harvesting empirical data but this critique overlooks the realities and challenges of surveying an unknown and geographically scattered target population.

After establishing initial contact with potential respondents, a copy of the online questionnaire and a cover letter were sent, requesting participation in the survey. In cases of non-reply, two further reminders were sent out. The overall response rate was encouraging: 71 per cent of those circulated answered the online survey, 1 per cent responded but declined to participate and 28 per cent did not respond at all.

An important disadvantage of the survey is that it does not ensure a statistically representative sample of the total population of Albanians studying abroad. Whilst this could compromise the validity of our analysis, we have no reason to believe that our survey sample is significantly biased in any way. Rather, we would point out that 651 responses to an online survey and a response rate of 71 per cent constitute quite an impressive result.

The survey contained 35 individual questions grouped under a number of thematic headings: socio-demographic profile of the student and their parental background; current position regarding study programme, location of study, method of financing studying abroad; decision-making factors and motivations for study-abroad; overall experience in the host institution and country; expectations to return to Albania, or not, following the completion of studies.

In the second research approach, 21 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with Albanian students who were at the time pursuing their studies abroad in various countries. The interviews were conducted in late 2019 and early 2020. Some of the interviews were by Skype, others were conducted face-to-face with the students when they were visiting their families in Albania. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and relevant extracts translated from Albanian to English for analysis. Standard ethical procedures were followed

when conducting the interviews – informed consent, permission to record, anonymity ensured etc. As with the online survey, we cannot claim these interviews as a representative sample. Rather, the results are illustrative and provide both depth and detail to the online survey findings. When we quote from the interviews in the ensuing analysis, we give the students pseudonyms and do not include any information, such as place of origin in Albania, which might compromise confidentiality.

We acknowledge that the survey and interview data are 3–4 years old by the time this paper is published. Our continued monitoring of the situation 'on the ground' – not difficult in a small country like Albania – reassures us that the story has not changed since our data were collected. Our contacts in Albanian high schools and universities tell us that, if anything, the desire to study abroad has increased in recent years.

We now present and discuss our research findings. We take each of the eight questions specified above and try to answer them with a mixture of data from the online survey and the in-depth interviews.

Why are so many Albanian students choosing to study abroad?

Compared to other countries in the Western Balkans (WB) and also in the wider realm of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Albania has a high level of outward student mobility. At the simple level of annual flows of tertiary-level students moving abroad, Albania has the largest numbers of all seven WB countries, despite the fact that Albania has a smaller population (2.9 million) than other countries such as Serbia (7.1m), Croatia (4.2m) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (3.8m). When the student numbers abroad are indexed against the total population, Kritz and Gurek (2018) rank Albania amongst the top countries of the world. Moreover, where other countries in the CEE region have comparably high rates, this is usually because of historical links to neighbouring countries with which they were, until recently, united (e.g. Slovak students to Czechia, Montenegrin students to Serbia, Bosnian students to neighbouring states of the former Yugoslavia).

How might we account for Albania's high outflow of student migrants? The following suggestions are hypotheses rather than empirically testable explanations. First, Albania rapidly expanded its universities and research institutes during the communist era[3] so that, even during this period of political and cultural closure, the population of university students grew from 7000 in 1960 to over 27,000 in 1990. In 1989 there were 137,316 graduates in Albania, 4.3 per cent of the population. Therefore, at the start of the post-communist transition, the Albanian population was more highly educated than other countries with a similar per capita average income.[4]

Secondly, during the communist era there was an established practice of sending favoured students abroad for specialised training. This, in any case, is a common syndrome in small countries where the full range of academic and research fields cannot be covered because of insufficient threshold numbers. Albanian students went initially to the Soviet Union and other socialist countries such as Romania and Bulgaria. Then, after Albania's break with the Soviet Union, students went to China in the late 1960s and 1970s. After the rupture with China, France was favoured for selected students in the 1980s, especially for postgraduate research.

A third reason to be suggested relates to the rapidly developing situation of the country after 1990. Such was the abruptness of the transition – from the most closed and autarchic of the CEE countries to one of the most chaotically open, with hundreds of thousands of migrants streaming across the borders with Greece and taking boats to Italy in the 1990s – that Albania suddenly became a society that was oriented to the outside world from which it had been cut off for so long. By 2000, large emigrant communities had become established abroad – 800,000 according to one estimate (Barjaba 2000), most of them in Greece and Italy. It was therefore natural that, with this new 'culture of migration', students would follow other migrants already abroad.

A possible fourth reason could be the perceived low quality of Albanian higher education, despite its profile of expansion. In the post-communist period numbers of enrolled students have grown apace: from 27,359 in 1990 to 40,267 in 2000, 134,877 in 2010 and 139,043 in 2018 (Gërmenji and Milo 2011; INSTAT 2015, 2019).

Whilst the hypothesis of a limited supply of university places does not hold true, there is evidence that the quality of the courses and teaching is seen as poor. No Albanian university appears in the widely cited QS World University Ranking. One of the factors affecting the quality of university education is its low budget allocation. According to Eurostat data, in 2014 Albania spent 3.3 per cent of its GDP on education (all levels), whereas the average for the EU countries was 5.3 per cent; this difference is all the more significant when we realise that Albania has a much lower GDP. In the meantime, the emigration of many of the younger, more energetic and talented university staff has further diminished the capacity of Albanian universities to deliver a high-quality product (Gëdeshi and King 2021).

Motivations to study abroad

The previous discussion on the perceived quality of Albanian higher education compared to what could be experienced abroad, was illustrated in many of the interviews. In the first of the quotes from the interviews, Andra compares university teaching in Albania with that in the UK, where she is studying:

> *Universities in the UK engage students in active learning through dialogue. The whole process is student-centred, which means you do not just study from a textbook, but each week the student is given a list of study materials and when you go to class the professor explains and you ask questions and discuss. In Albania, you just learn from the textbook… you do not have any alternative resources.*

Other students point out that in Albanian universities libraries are poorly stocked, knowledge is not applied in a practical manner, and scientific research is limited in quantity and quality. Relatedly, foreign universities offer qualifications which are more reputable in international labour markets. According to Gjergji,

> *The quality of universities in Germany is much higher* [than in Albania] *and I know that with the diploma that I will receive I will have better chances of finding a job in Germany or in any other EU country*.

Table 2. Factors determining the decision to study abroad (%)

	Very important	Slightly important	Not important	Not applicable
I saw study abroad as a unique adventure	14.9	39.7	34.1	11.2
My family was keen for me to study abroad	25.2	39.1	24.4	11.3
I wanted to study at a prestigious university	66.2	26.3	5.5	2.0
I saw study abroad as a step towards an international career	77.2	18.0	3.4	1.4
There were limited places or courses at Albanian universities	3.2	11.2	37.1	48.5

Source: Authors' survey of Albanian students abroad.

In the online survey, students were presented with a range of factors that could have determined their decision to stay abroad, and they were asked to rate each factor on a scale of importance. Table 2 gives their responses. The results confirm that it is not the limited supply of places or courses at Albanian universities that drives students to go abroad. Rather, the two dominant factors influencing their decisions are the chance to

access an international career, as stated by Gjergji in the quote above, and the ambition to study at an internationally recognised, 'good' university. These two factors are closely inter-related and condition each other, but the desire for a successful career is the dominant one – 77.2 per cent rate this factor 'very important'.

Besides these factors, two others are somewhat relevant, according to the online survey. One quarter of respondents asserted that the support of their family was 'very important' (plus 39 per cent who scored it as 'slightly important'). As well as general moral support and encouragement, family can play a vital role in helping to finance the study-abroad project. Lastly, some students see going abroad as an adventure, 15 per cent rating it 'very important' and another 40 per cent as 'slightly important'. Amongst the aspects of this motive elaborated in the interviews, studying abroad was seen as a way to experience freedom, to escape the traditional norms of Albanian society and to be open to a different culture and a richer social life. Here is a typical interview extract which stresses this latter point, from Ermira, studying in Florence, Italy:

> *When I left Albania my initial thought was simply to get a better education… What I also thought was to benefit from a higher level of culture, to go to a country that is more developed and has a certain history… and is more open…*

Based on the students' responses to the online questionnaire and their narrated accounts in the interviews, we get a clear idea of the main drivers of this educational migration. The main motivation is to get a better job than could be acquired if they had stayed in Albania for their higher studies. The same general conclusion arises from other studies of 'East–West' student migration in Europe, for example from two doctoral theses on Denmark as a host country (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2018; Mosneaga 2012). For some of our respondents, the foreign degree, from an internationally recognised, even highly prestigious, university, is seen as the route to a better placement in the Albanian labour market when they return. In the words of Elton, a student in Germany:

> *When you see your friends who have graduated abroad and then find a good job when they return to Albania, you feel you also want to apply to study abroad for a better qualification* [than available in Albania].

For other respondents, the decision to study abroad is motivated more by the wish to remain abroad and develop an 'international' career, either in the host country of study or elsewhere. Studying abroad for a number of years is seen as a first, valuable step in the integration process – learning the language, adapting to the society and culture, developing friendships and, ultimately, professional contacts and networks. In many cases, we found that students who initially intended to return to Albania upon completion of their studies, changed their minds in favour of staying abroad. The idea to switch their plans evolves over time, depending on their degree of integration in the host country and the opportunities that open up – either for further study and research or for employment and career development. We come back to the important topic of students' future plans later in the paper.

Who studies abroad?

Generally, those students who can afford to study abroad come from families with sufficient financial, human and social capital to support their venture in various ways. They come from family backgrounds in business, the professions and the higher echelons of government. Table 3 offers strong evidence for the importance of parental background. It compares the parental occupational profile of the online-survey respondents (Albanian students abroad) with two other groups: the parents of students enrolled in Albanian universities, and the

parents of high-school students. These comparator groups were surveyed as part of the larger research project from which this paper derives, but are included here only for the purposes of comparison.

Table 3. Occupational status of parents of Albanian students abroad and in Albania (%)

	Albanian students abroad (N=651)		Students in Albania (N=1650)		High-school students (N=450)	
	Father	**Mother**	**Father**	**Mother**	**Father**	**Mother**
Manual worker	13.0	4.5	23.0	10.8	25.0	14.0
Clerical and sales	21.6	22.1	17.2	12.6	16.3	14.7
Professionals	25.3	33.5	12.7	15.4	8.9	17.7
Business	28.2	13.6	20.5	9.5	30.6	10.4
Homemaker	0.2	13.9	0.5	36.5	0.5	23.4
Other	11.7	12.3	26.1	15.3	18.6	20.0

Source: Authors' surveys of Albanian students abroad and in Albania.

Note: 'Other' includes farmer, pensioner, unemployed, no answer.

The table shows that the students abroad are largely the offspring of professionals (doctors, lawyers, architects, university professors, IT experts, journalists etc.) and of business persons (owners, directors, managers, partners etc.). For the fathers of the students abroad, 53.5 per cent are in these two occupational sectors (business and professions), compared to 33.2 per cent of fathers of students attending Albanian universities, and 39.5 per cent of the fathers of high-school pupils. For mothers, the contrast is even more striking: respectively 47.1 per cent, 24.9 per cent and 28.1 per cent. Mid-level occupations in the clerical, sales and administrative sectors are also more frequent amongst the parents of students abroad, compared to the other two groups. By contrast, parental occupations in manual work and the disparate but generally low-status 'other' category are much more widespread amongst the parents of students studying in Albania.

The key message from Table 3 is that study abroad is a vehicle for the social reproduction of elite status within Albanian families and from one generation to another – a trend widely noted in studies of ISM in other geographical contexts (e.g. King, Findlay, Ahrens and Dunne 2011; Lulle and Buzinska 2017; Waters 2006, 2012).

Even within this broadly elite category, there are some subdivisions noted in the survey data. For example, the wealthiest and most politically powerful families send their children to high-ranking universities in the UK (Russell Group universities) and the USA (Ivy League), and to a lesser extent to Switzerland, the Netherlands and France. This requires heavy investments not only in tuition fees and accommodation (though scholarships may be competed for) but also in good private schools in Albania and in intensive language training. The survey data show that 62 per cent of the parents of students studying in the UK are business persons, professionals or senior state officials.

Interviews with study-abroad students confirm the crucial importance of the various types of capital noted above. Arjan, a student in Germany, speaks about his friends and acquaintances who are Albanian international students:

> *The parents of my friends are intellectuals. Most of them come from the middle and upper classes. I don't know any* [Albanian] *student in Germany whose parents are workers.*

Interviewees stressed that it was only the high-flyers in their schools who were able to win scholarships to study abroad. Therefore, we detect a double selectivity process in operation: it is the 'brightest and best' who leave; and those who leave to study abroad are much more likely to have parents who are graduates; who have, in other words, 'intellectual capital'. Table 4 makes this latter comparison on the basis of the same three survey groups as Table 3. Study-abroad students are twice as likely to have both parents who are graduates, and half as likely to have neither parent as a graduate.

Table 4. University education of parents of Albanian students abroad and in Albania (%)

Q: Do your parents have university education?	Albanian students abroad (N=651)	Students in Albania (N=1650)	High-school students (N=450)
Yes, both of them	55.9	27.6	26.2
Yes, father only	8.0	11.8	15.1
Yes, mother only	11.1	8.0	11.9
No, neither of them	25.0	52.7	45.8

Source: Authors' surveys of Albanian students abroad and in Albania.

Beyond family wealth acquired through being a member of the business, intellectual, professional or political classes, another source of capital to finance students' enrolment in universities abroad is the savings accumulated from parents' prior emigration. The sheer scale of emigration – with an estimated 'stock' of around 1.4 million Albanians abroad – means that most individuals and families in Albania have relatives abroad, or they themselves have spent time abroad in emigration. According to the online survey, more than one in five respondents are from 'emigrant families' where at least one parent (nearly always the father) has been an emigrant, 47 per cent of them in Greece and 25 per cent in Italy.[5] Most returned in the 2010s because of the long-running economic crisis in these two countries. According to the interview accounts, one of the main objectives of parents' emigration was precisely to acquire the financial means to give their children a better education. Elga, a student in Italy, describes this process:

> *Albanians have always made sacrifices for their children… Albanian families* [with experience of emigration], *being somewhat disappointed by the economic and social environment in Albania, have a stronger desire to push their children to migrate abroad. Perhaps, knowing first-hand* [from their own migration experience] *it is not easy to start a new life abroad, they invest for the future of their children.*

Of course, financially sponsoring their offspring to study abroad is extremely expensive, and the less wealthy adopt other strategies, such as encouraging their children to study for their first degree in Albania and then to go abroad for the shorter one- or two-year master's degree. Other families send their children for their bachelor studies to 'less prestigious' higher education destinations such as Turkey, Bulgaria or Cyprus, where tuition and living costs are low, and then send them for master's studies to universities in Germany, the Netherlands or the UK where the prestige and quality of degree are higher, but so are the costs.

Some Albanian students abroad benefit from grants, scholarships and bursaries, either from the Albanian government or from host countries and their individual universities. According to the online survey, 21 per cent have such awards as their main financial support (Table 5). In Albania, the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth has an Excellence Fund to sponsor selected, high-performing students who apply to study abroad; for many years this scheme was backed by the Open Society (Soros Foundation). Also, countries such as Italy,

Hungary, Poland and Cyprus offer bursaries to students coming from poorer countries. Albana, a student in Italy, benefitted from this scheme:

> *In Italy it is a good thing that you can be entitled to a bursary. Albanians can qualify for this because, compared to Italians, we have lower incomes… Italy has many bursaries… but you have to provide documents as evidence of family income.*

Table 5. Main sources of funding for Albanian students abroad

Q: What is the main source of funding for your studies?	No.	%
Self-financing (mainly part-time work)	199	30.6
Parental support	288	44.2
Grant or bursary	138	21.2
Other (loans etc.)	26	4.0
Total	651	100.0

Source: Author's survey of Albanian students abroad.

Table 6. Part-time employment of Albanian students in the host country

Q: Do you have a part-time job?	No.	%
No	348	53.5
Yes, fewer than 8 hours per week	74	11.4
8–20 hours per week	162	24.9
More than 20 hours per week	67	10.3
Total	651	100.0

Source: Author's survey of Albanian students abroad.

Table 5 shows that, alongside parental support and grants and bursaries, students' self-financing is the third important means of sustaining their studies abroad, nominated by more than 30 per cent of respondents as their main source of finance. The questionnaire allowed respondents to check more than one category of financial support and in Table 6, which drills down into the self-support option in more detail, we see that, overall, 46 per cent of the respondents have a part-time job in the host country. Moreover, many work long hours to support their studies. In the interviews, students related many variations on this theme. We select below a typical example, from Mirlinda in Italy:

> *After I finished my exams in the first year, I started to work… I worked in a shopping centre. I did this for eight months, working seven days a week, 12 hours each day. Therefore it was not easy to study… Then I started an internship with a company, which is now my stable work place… I work 45 hours a week, Monday to Friday… Many Albanian students I know in Italy have a job; none of them stays only in the lecture room in the mornings and lives a social life in the evenings. Absolutely not. They work. Many work as waiters or dish-washers, whereas the luckier ones find a more decent job. But generally, all Albanian students here in Italy work.*

In many cases, doing part-time is not only an opportunity to earn an income to cover their living expenses, but also a chance to establish social connections, to integrate, and even to make possible contacts for the future.

Countries of study

We presented the UNESCO data on the country locations of Albanian students abroad in Table 1. These data referred to 2017. Table 7 gives the destinations of the online survey respondents which suggests a somewhat different geographical distribution, above all the rise of Germany as the most popular destination country. Interviewees who were studying in Germany were keenly aware of the increased interest in studying there in recent years. Here is what Endri, a student who has been in Germany for many years, says:

> *Recently, the number of Albanian students here has been on the rise. When I arrived here, there were only a handful of Albanian students… Whereas now I see more and more of them; numbers are increasing…*

And Arben, gives his reasons for choosing to study there:

> *Germany is one of the favourites* [for Albanian students] *because its universities offer top-quality education at almost no fee. For six months I pay 150 euros, whereas in France you would have to pay up to 2000 euros per semester. In addition, Germany at the moment is the leading country in the European Union and offers the best employment opportunities… Germany, I would say, has become the number one country for Albanians to study abroad.*

Table 7. Destinations countries of Albanian students abroad

Country	No.	%
Germany	166	25.5
Italy	110	17.0
Turkey	84	12.9
France	45	6.9
Netherlands	37	5.7
USA	31	4.8
UK	26	4.0
Bulgaria	24	3.7
Austria	18	2.8
Belgium	16	2.5
Romania	11	1.7
Poland	10	1.5
Czechia	10	1.5
Greece	9	1.4
Sweden	8	1.2
Other countries	46	6.9
Total	651	100.00

Source: Authors' survey of students abroad.

The case of Germany as the favoured destination currently for Albanian students wanting to study abroad is interesting as it reflects an attractive combination of good academic reputation and low course fees (albeit fairly high living costs). It somewhat subverts the correlations noted earlier between high-quality university systems and high fees and living costs (e.g. USA, UK, France, etc.), and between lower-standard university systems and low fees and living costs (e.g. Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania etc.). In the case of Germany, the

perception is not only of an economically powerful advanced country but also one that offers good social support to migrants of all kinds, including refugees and asylum-seekers (Gëdeshi and King 2022). A study on migration intentions of a large sample of the Albanian population (N=1421) carried out as part of the European Values Survey in 2018 revealed that 52 per cent of 18–40 year-olds expressed their wish to emigrate, and Germany was the top target destination (King and Gëdeshi 2020).

A final contributing factor conditioning students' choice of destination country, and the university in that country, is the presence of relatives and friends already in that location. Almost 44 per cent of the students in the survey said they had contacts with Albanians in the host country before selecting the target university. This is evaluated as important when accessing living accommodation, help with preparing documentation and finding a part-time job. In the words of Majlinda:

> *I have two cousins in England… who have finished their bachelor studies and are continuing with their master's degrees. Being in constant communication with them, I had all the necessary information to apply for a university place in England.*

Fields of study

Albanian students follow diverse academic programmes when they are abroad as international students, but the additional question that arises is whether their fields of study differ markedly from those followed by the non-migrant students who remain in Albania. Table 8 sheds light on this question, by comparing the online survey results with statistics on the total population of university students in Albania.

Table 8. Main fields of study of Albanians students abroad and in Albania (%)

Main field of study	Albanian students abroad (N=643)	Albanian students in Albania 2018
Education	0.3	7.2
Arts and Humanities	2.3	10.3
Social Sciences	14.5	10.1
Business, Management and Law	27.9	24.1
Natural Sciences and Maths	11.2	5.1
ICT	18.0	7.2
Engineering and Construction	18.4	14.4
Health and Welfare Services	6.4	14.9
Other and Unknown	1.0	6.7

Sources: Authors' survey of Albanian students abroad; INSTAT (2019).

There are broad similarities in the proportions of students in some academic fields (Social Sciences; Business, Management and Law; Engineering and Construction), but clear differences in others. Students who study in Albania are more represented in Education, Arts and Humanities, and Health and Welfare, whereas those heading abroad opt disproportionately for Natural Sciences, Maths, and Information and Communications Technology. These latter options are chosen largely because degrees in these fields lead to the best-paid graduate jobs, especially for students who want to stay abroad to pursue their careers.

Interview narratives shed further light on the rationales behind the choice of study-fields, and in particular, the concentration on scientific and technical subjects. Here is what Endri, a student of Informatics in Germany, had to say:

> *Choosing the field of study is conditioned by employment opportunities* [here in Germany]*... Of all the Albanian students that I have known here… most of them study in the scientific field; Economics and Medicine also attract considerable numbers… there are significant numbers studying Electronics, Informatics and Mathematics. In* [names big city in Germany]*, I do not know of any Albanian student studying Social Sciences. They* [Albanian students in Germany] *are driven by the fact that if you graduate in Economics or Informatics, it is easier to find a job... also if you graduate in Mathematics. If, on the other hand, you graduate in Social Sciences, you don't know what the future has in store.*

Benefits of studying abroad

When students were asked a question in the survey about their level of satisfaction with their experience of studying abroad, an overwhelming proportion of them (96 per cent) declared themselves to be 'very satisfied' (62.5 per cent) or 'satisfied' (33.6 per cent). Just 3.4 per cent maintained a neutral stance and only 0.5 per cent were either 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied'. In another set of survey questions, we probed various dimensions of their experience; Table 9 contains the results. The figures are largely self-explanatory. The most positively expressed benefits were ascribed to 'improving academic and professional knowledge', 'importance for career development' (wherever that may take place), and 'personal maturity and development' – all assigned shares of over 80 per cent of respondents seeing them as 'extremely valuable'. Also noteworthy are high shares (over 60 per cent checking 'extremely valuable') for acquiring new knowledge of languages and another country and its culture.

Table 9. Students' assessment of the benefits of studying abroad (%)

	Extremely valuable	Valuable	Somewhat valuable	Not at all valuable
Enhancing my academic and professional knowledge	90.2	8.9	0.9	0.0
Importance for my overall career development	84.3	13.8	1.8	0.0
Importance for developing a specifically international career	80.1	17.7	2.2	0.0
Importance for my plans to settle permanently abroad	39.4	36.8	19.3	4.5
Improving my language skills	66.5	24.7	7.9	0.9
Knowledge and understanding of another country	60.5	31.3	7.1	1.1
Personal maturity and development	86.3	12.7	0.9	0.0
New ways of thinking about my home country	58.8	31.6	7.8	1.7

Source: Authors' survey of Albanian students abroad.

Reading through the comments made by students in response to an open question on the schedule which invited respondents to make written comments on their study-abroad experience, four themes stand out, each illustrated below by a typical example. The first enlarges on the quality of teaching and learning.

> *I have not finished my first year yet, and I am already very happy with the quality of lectures and academic knowledge* (Luljeta, UK).

The second stresses the openness of discussion about ideas and concepts, promoting a deeper and more critical understanding of the subject being studied.

> *Individuality and critical thinking are respected and encouraged, motivating you to freely express yourself and critically reflect on all aspects, even on the opinions of the professors* (Nora, Germany).

Third, meritocracy and appreciation of good work are highlighted, as shown in this comment:

> *I often have to remind my relatives that the US is not a heavenly place, as assumed by many Albanians. I always tell them that to achieve something, you have to work very hard, but the difference, which makes me want to study in the US, is that my work is appreciated here, unlike in Albania* (Eriselda, US).

Fourth, significant benefits from study abroad are found in its effects on personal maturity and self-realisation; these are benefits which extend beyond the qualification earned.

> *It's a life experience, more than a diploma, irrespective of how reputable the latter may be* (Landi, Sweden).

The fourth point was elaborated at greater length in several interviews. As an example, Ana, a student in Germany, says:

> *My experience thus far in Germany has changed me as an individual; it has changed the way I perceive life in general and daily situations. I have matured, I have developed as a person, and I have been able to set clear goals about what I want to take from and give to the surrounding environment and beyond. It has given me opportunities and has opened doors I did not believe were possible. Most importantly, it has given me independence, appreciation and self-confidence.*

Future plans, and attitudes towards return

The final set of questions on both the survey and interview schedules relates to the key question posed in the title of this paper: will the students return from abroad and, if not, does this constitute a brain drain? Rather than pose a simple 'yes or no' question about intention to return, we wanted to respect the more complex options likely to be going through students' minds when they contemplate the future. Hence, the survey question presented them with a range of alternative intentions and trajectories. These reflected the interactions between the decision to stay or return and the transition from study to work, and the timing of any intended return – immediately after graduating or longer-term. Table 10 spells these out, along with the numbers and percentages of responses to each option. The figures are rather stark, and definitely speak of an incipient brain drain. More than half of the respondents do not intend to go back to Albania 'for the foreseeable future'. Only 5.4 per cent intend to return to Albania immediately after completing their current programme of studies

abroad. The second most frequently cited option, 31.3 per cent, is to return to Albania after a period spent working abroad. Also worthy of note is the number of 'other' trajectories, around one in eight of the respondents: these comprised a variety of plans, including onward-migrating to a 'third' country, plans to continue studying, or other plans dictated more by personal circumstances such as marriage, having children etc.

Table 10. Albanian students abroad: future plans and return to Albania

Q: Regarding your plans to return to Albania, which of the following statements most closely matches your expectations?	**No.**	**%**
I do not intend to return to Albania in the foreseeable future	327	50.5
Return to Albania immediately after graduating, to look for employment	30	4.6
Return to Albania immediately after graduating, for further study	5	0.8
Return to Albania to look for employment, after a period spent working abroad	195	30.1
Return to Albania to study, after a period of working abroad	8	1.2
Other plans	83	12.8
Total	648	100.0

Source: Authors' survey of Albanian students abroad.

It must be emphasised that the options set out in Table 10 are intentions and it is well-known in migration studies that reality may turn out differently. Those intending to return soon after graduating may change their minds during the course of the rest of their study programme. Those intending to stay on and undertake employment abroad may not find what they are looking for. Those who say they intend not to return to Albania in the foreseeable future may change their minds due, for example, to family pressure, nostalgia, or an unexpected event, not foreseen at the present time, such as marriage to a 'local' or inheriting a business. It is difficult to predict how these mismatches between intentions and outcomes will work out but, in general, the pattern revealed in the migration literature tends towards a kind of 'myth of return' (Anwar 1979) whereby an intended return is repeatedly deferred or, perhaps, never takes place. Consider, for instance, the interview extract from Arjan:

> *When I came to Germany to study, I was not exactly thinking of staying here. I remember always saying 'I am going back'* [to Albania]*... Then, as I began to gradually integrate, getting to know more friends, I changed my position. Now I am certain I am going to stay in Germany.*

Endri, already quoted earlier, confirmed the trend to stay on in Germany:

> *I have many Albanian friends here and I can say that 90 per cent of them want to stay in Germany… There are also incentives from the German state to attract technology graduates* [to stay]…

The combination of the strong German labour market and government measures to incentivise foreign students in selected labour-shortage fields to stay on after graduation means that Germany has a high (intended) retention rate of Albanian (and other international) students. The survey data show that 80 per cent of Albanian

respondents in Germany who do not intend returning to Albania want to stay in Germany; the remainder opt for other European countries or the US.

In other host countries, the attractions of staying on are not so strong. Edira is a student in a small university city in Central Italy.

> *In this city, employment opportunities for graduates are limited. In other Italian cities, maybe the situation is different, I don't know. I will try to find something here* [in Italy]. *Other Albanians take any job just to stay in Italy... I have heard of very few cases of return to Albania. They mostly go to Germany or England…*

The survey data confirm Edira's diagnosis. Of the total student respondents from Italy who say they do not intend to return to Albania, only 37 per cent say they want to stay in Italy and 63 per cent want to move on to other European countries, especially Germany, the UK and the Netherlands. The share of the 'non-returnees' who intend to onward-migrate rather than stay in their current host country is much higher in Turkey (88.4 per cent) and in CEE countries like Bulgaria, Romania and Poland (but here the figures are based on much smaller samples – see Table 7). For all first-destination countries, the preferred onward migration destinations are the more prosperous EU countries, especially Germany, and the US.

After the intention not to return, the second most frequent survey response was to defer return until some years of work experience has been acquired abroad (Table 10). On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a way of postponing a difficult decision; on the other hand, it could reflect a wish to maximise experience and human capital, so that the return, whenever it takes place, is more successful and impactful. Indeed, many Albanian students abroad express a desire to 'contribute something' to their home country's development. Agon, a student in Germany, makes this personal argument as follows:

> *After some years of working abroad, I want to return to Albania and try to change something in my home country… I think that it is a moral obligation of every person to contribute, however modestly, in a positive way.*

Other students, in their narratives, combine the 'duty' argument to return with a sense of satisfaction at (potentially) being able to effect change in a small country. This is the case of Ervin, doing postgraduate studies in the UK:

> *Albania has its advantages for me. First I have there a certain social capital; I have friends and acquaintances… Also, in Albania, you are able to see the impact of your work if you engage in a certain policy. In the UK, the machinery is so big and bureaucratic that you are totally detached from the impact of your work.*

Ervin's wish to return to Albania to effect change there turns our attention to the groups in Table 10 who *do* intend to return, sooner or later. According to the survey responses and the interviews, those who plan to return are those who have 'contacts' in Albania, for example whose parents run a business or are high state officials. In these cases, the chances to find a decent job or to advance in professional career in Albania are much higher. Anisa, a student in Italy, says:

> *Most of the students* [here in Italy] *want to stay. Only a few want to return. It is mostly those who have a secure job lined up in Albania: they say they want to return because they know what awaits them. This is how things work in Albania – to know someone* [who can help you].

Other students may have more personal reasons to intend to return; often these are related to family circumstances, as in the case of Dritan, a postgraduate student in the UK:

> *Until now, I have tried to avoid the dilemma – whether to stay here or return. But the main reason, in my case, to return to Albania, is my family, my parents. I would rather not leave them alone; this is important.*

Dritan's final remark is interesting and probably reflects the Albanian cultural tradition of it being the duty of the youngest son in the family to take care of the parents in their old age. This means that the son should return to be near to his parents and to attend to their financial and care needs – even if, in practice, it will be the younger son's wife who administers the care (King and Vullnetari 2009).

Undoubtedly, the challenge of finding employment with a decent income is the main economic factor that deters Albanian students abroad from returning. Added to this are several other obstacles mentioned especially in the interviews, often with a very critical and despairing tone. These barriers revolve around the interrelated effects of corruption, political instability, the lack of professionalism and efficiency in all sectors of society, and the need to have 'connections' in order to achieve almost anything in life – a job, a building permit, a business license, and so on. We end this section of the paper with a series of interview quotes which voice participants' direct experience and perceptions of these issues.

> *Nepotism is widespread in Albania; it is flagrant. To get a job you need to know someone who knows someone. I have many friends in Albania and I would say that only 10 per cent of them have managed to find a job based on their own merits and qualifications. The others were helped by someone of influence* (Pranvera, Italy).

> *In Albania, the salaries are very low… Your salary does not permit you to live a life on your own, to cover your living costs, let alone go somewhere abroad on holiday* (Edmond, Germany).

> *In Albania, you may have a job today, but tomorrow, after elections, governments change and you lose your job. Here* [in Germany], *your job is safe. If you have a contract, it is difficult for it to be terminated, unless you commit some serious crime* (Alban, Germany).

Having presented a range of empirical data on the motivations, experiences and future plans of a large sample of Albanian students abroad, in the closing sections of the paper we consider the wider consequences of our findings and their implications for future policies to alleviate brain drain and encourage 'brain return'.

Consequences

Given our key finding that most Albanian students abroad do not contemplate an imminent return once their studies are finished, what are the consequences of this potential brain drain? There are two main impacts: the financial one, and the loss of highly educated and (potentially) highly skilled human capital.

The non-return of university students represents the embodied loss of tens of millions of euros per year for a country that is one of the poorest, not only in the Western Balkans, but in Europe as a whole. This loss is made up of several financial components whose size and scale can, however, only be speculatively estimated.

The first element pertains to the cost of 'producing' Albanian students up to the moment when they leave the country, either to start their bachelor degree abroad or, having already completed their first degree in Albania, for postgraduate studies abroad. In its study on the *Cost of Youth Migration*, the Westminster

Foundation for Democracy (2020) estimates the costs of raising a young person in Albania to the end of their secondary education to be 9267 euros and to the completion of tertiary education (in Albania) 18,283 euros, in 2018. If there are 17,448 Albanian students abroad (UNESCO figure for 2017; Table 1), then some kind of calculation can be made for this loss of invested preparation in human capital. If all 17,448 students left at the end of their secondary/high school education, the loss would amount to around 160 million euros. If, however, a proportion of them left after completing their first degree in Albania, then the cost multiplier is almost twice as high (18,283 vs 9267 euros) for that (unknown) proportion.

A second calculation, equally speculative, can be made on the basis of the costs of the study programme. According to the interviews with students, the average cost per month (tuition fees plus accommodation, food and other living expenses) ranges from 650 euros in Greece to 2000 euros in the UK. For the two most popular destinations the monthly figures are 750 in Italy and 850 in Germany. If we take the average annual costs for all students at 8000 euros, we might conclude that, for the 17,448 Albanian students abroad, the total annual amount channelled out of Albania to fund the studies of students abroad is around 140 million euros. This is certainly an impoverishing process for an already-poor country like Albania. Erinda, an interviewee in France, put her finger on a widespread view when she said:

> *Through brain drain, the Albanian state is losing its own investment. This is one of the largest losses currently for Albania.*

Erinda, like other interviewees, was alive to the multi-dimensionality of the Albanian brain drain: the loss both of talent in the form of the country's best qualified students, most of whom, it would appear, do not intend to return any time soon; and of capital and human investment in the upraising and ongoing education of that talent.

How might these costs be mitigated? Part of the financial cost can theoretically be recouped by remittances – the classic 'pay-back' for the initial investment in migration. But will the students, once they start working abroad, behave like the earlier labour migrants to Greece and Italy who, originating mainly from poor rural families, had a high propensity to save and send a large share of their foreign earnings back home? (de Zwager *et al.* 2005; Vullnetari and King 2011). We already noted that many students are, at least partially, supported by their parents who send them money to help with their fees and living expenses whilst they are studying abroad.[7] Moreover, because most of the students in our survey come from elite or middle-class, urban-based families, there is less (or no) need to send remittances. In the words of Anila, who recently graduated in Medicine in the Netherlands,

> *I do not send remittances, in the form of cash, because my parents do not need that. I do, however, send them gifts and other stuff. Of course, should the need arise, I would try to send money also.*

Apart from sending remittances to their families if and when they start working abroad, there are other ways that, in the future, graduated students who do not return might help the development of their home country. Survey and interview data show that, whilst abroad, Albanian students retain close links with their family and friends in Albania. Thus, kinship solidarity and social capital with a broader network are both maintained. Close connections are kept via social media, the internet, Facebook, Skype, etc. According to the online survey, 97 per cent of respondents regularly communicate via email or other web channels with friends in Albania. Almost 47 per cent have spoken to 1–5 friends during the week before they answered the survey, 33 per cent to 6–10 friends, 15 per cent to 11–20 and 2 per cent to over 20 friends.[8]

Another important means of staying in touch with Albania is through the news media: following Albanian news on the internet or TV broadcasts. Besart, an interviewee in Germany, tells how he keeps up-to-date on political, economic and social events in Albania:

> *I am informed about what happens in Albania… I read the news regularly and learn everything from the internet… I find half an hour to an hour* [every day] *to read all the news* [about Albania].

Finally, there are visits: 93 per cent of the survey respondents visited Albania at least once during the first year of their studies abroad, and this proportion drops slightly to 86 per cent for those in their final year of study.[9] Whilst these visits are primarily motivated by the need to keep in touch with family and friends, they also enable the students to observe how Albania is developing (or not) and to keep thinking about options for return. During these visits, students are also able to transmit new ideas and concepts about values, behaviour, social and family relationships, civil society etc. to their families, friends and wider communities in Albania.[10]

Many of the students we contacted for the research maintained close friendships with their peers who had enrolled at Albanian universities and some of these participants emphasised the need for close cooperation with those in Albania and with Albanian universities. Ermira, a student in Germany, wrote the following in an open comment on her survey questionnaire:

> *We need more cooperation between students abroad and those in Albania. I believe that if, in the future, Albanian professionals return and work together with those in Albania, then the country would develop more and there would be no need for Albanians to emigrate.*

Ermira's forward-looking suggestion highlights the need for Albanian students and graduate professionals working abroad to keep in close social, educational and professional contact with their opposite numbers in Albania. Whether this will happen and, if it does, how effective this will be, are moot questions. A 2018 survey of Albania's so-called scientific diaspora (basically, PhD-holders working abroad) showed that they, too, desired closer academic and professional cooperation with universities, research institutes and consultancies in Albania, but found it hard to achieve this, largely, they said, because of a lack of initiative and willingness on the Albanian side (Gëdeshi and King 2021). Despite the widely expressed desire for international collaboration, only 22 per cent of the respondents in this latter survey (N=725) actually did cooperate, and only sporadically, with universities and scientific institutions in Albania. Hence it was unlikely that the doctoral brain drain would be easily reversed under these conditions, or that non-returnees living abroad could make a meaningful contribution in terms of transmitting some of their expertise to Albania.

Conclusions: the wider picture and policy implications

What interpretive and policy lessons can be deduced from the evidence contained in this paper? This is the eighth and final question on the list presented at the outset.

The first thing to say is that ISM is widely regarded as a 'normal' and beneficial process, especially in the global North. It helps to ease the friction and imbalances in international markets for skilled labour, and fosters intercultural awareness. From the point of view of the individual student or graduate, ISM is usually seen as highly positive, as this international experience makes for an interesting and rewarding (but also often challenging) life episode and, in many cases, is a step towards a successful international career (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003). This is the optimistic reading of ISM; the more problematic implications, related to financial hardship, academic

struggles and the stigmatisation of certain categories of students, were noted earlier, especially with reference to the experiences of Chinese students in the US (Fong 2011; Jiang 2021).

The problem with the Albanian case of student migration is that is highly imbalanced, with very few incoming students. The relative scale of the loss of embryonic skilled human capital is beyond that experienced by virtually all other European countries. Along with the mass exodus of lower-skilled labour since the early 1990s, student and graduate outflows are a symptom of the structural weakness of the Albanian economy. The outflows of students and workers bear witness to Albanian's peripheral position, not so much geographically but economically and geopolitically, within the European sphere. This implies not only the weak structure of the Albanian economy, which is over-reliant on consumption underwritten by foreign-earned income and remittances, but also of the low status and under-funding of Albanian universities.

There are two key issues which need to be confronted at a policy level when interpreting Albanian ISM (Gribble 2008). The first thing is the large scale, relative to the age-appropriate population, of Albanians' propensity to study abroad. This 'export' of both undergraduate and postgraduate students seems, on the basis of our survey data and international comparative statistics, to be greater than almost any other country in Europe. It is all the more remarkable given the generally low income levels in Albania and the fact that it is not enmeshed in any system of post-colonial relationship. Moreover, all Albanian students studying abroad must do so in a language other than their own.

The key question thus becomes: how can this loss of young brains be stemmed, especially given that the expressed intentions of young and educated people to leave Albania appear to be higher than ever before (King and Gëdeshi 2020). The obvious recommendation to be made – but so much easier to say than to implement – is to ensure better prospects for Albanian youth to stay in Albania for their higher education and subsequent careers. This would require several things: improving the standard of Albanian universities and linking them more effectively into international academic networks, including for short-term student exchanges so that students are not 'lost' but ensured to return; creating better job prospects for graduates, with higher incomes and clearer career structures; and, on a wider plane, improving the social welfare system, and clamping down on corruption at all levels of society.

The second key issue concerns prospects for return. Although many students and graduates studying and working abroad want to keep their ties to Albania, both with their families and their wider social and professional networks, in reality their return intentions are shaped by pragmatic, largely economic considerations. Hence, the second key policy challenge arises: what needs to be done to encourage those who have moved abroad to return? The reasons for non-return given by our participants in the survey and in interviews are clear and consistent with other surveys on youth migration (King and Gëdeshi 2020) and on the scientific diaspora (Gëdeshi and King 2021). The 'repel' factors for non-return are the same as those which drive young people to leave in the first place, namely low incomes, poor career prospects, deficient social and physical infrastructure, dissatisfaction with the political culture of corruption and nepotism, and an overall sense that 'there is no future in Albania'. Even if greater numbers of students could be incentivised to return, what guarantees are there that they would not become disillusioned and therefore pushed to emigrate again? (cf. Christofi and Thompson 2007). The challenge for the Albanian government going forward is to reduce the negative factors which make people leave and discourage them from coming back.

Notes

1. Estimates range from 1.2 to 1.6 million for the Albanian emigrant population. The total population living in Albania is less than 3 million. For some useful comparative data see the World Bank's *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016* where the relative scale of emigration from Albania is seen

to be roughly on a par with some other Western Balkan countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro) but much higher than others (Croatia, North Macedonia and Serbia).

2. The research was funded by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Parts of the present paper are taken from our report to FES, which was issued in both Albanian and English in November 2020.
3. The University of Tirana was founded in 1957 and others soon followed, along with the Albanian Academy of Sciences in 1972.
4. This conclusion is based on data sourced from the Ministry of Economy (1991) of Albania and the World Bank (2010).
5. In the online survey respondents were asked: 'Have either of your parents ever lived outside Albania for more than six months? If so, where and for how long?'
6. We repeat that this is a rough estimate and should be treated circumspectly. For instance, some of the students have scholarships or bursaries, others may work in order to minimise the financial burden on their family, and others may find accommodation with their emigrant relatives in the host country.
7. This is an illustration of 'reverse remittances', where the country exporting part of its human capital is also sending abroad financial resources (Mazzucato 2011).
8. Students were asked the question: 'Other than your family, state the number of friends in Albania you contacted last week by email or on the web'.
9. Students were asked: 'How often did you return to Albania during your first year and during your last year (if a final-year student)?'
10. This is what Levitt (1998) refers to as 'social remittances'.

Funding

The authors gratefully acknowledge the Friedrich Ebert Foundation for supporting the research project from which the data for this paper are drawn.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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How to cite this article: King R., Gëdeshi I. (2023). Albanian Students Abroad: A Potential Brain Drain? *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 12(2): 73–97.