

# **The effect of virtual international student mobility experiences on physical cross-border academic mobility aspirations of young adults from different socio-economic backgrounds from Russia and Kazakhstan**

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## **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

## **Abstract**

Putting on hold cross-border mobility due to the recent pandemic has given rise to virtual student mobility. These temporary transitions of students to virtual learning environment are likely to influence future international student flows.

When speaking about cross-border mobility, a significant number of studies (Bracht et al., 2006; Findlay et al., 2006; Wiers-Jenssen, 2008) conclude that a study abroad period enhances future mobility aspirations. In turn, research on virtual mobility states that there is no clear evidence that would compare virtual formats with physical mobility in terms of outcomes and wider benefits for its participants (Research for CULT Committee, 2020). Hence, the effect of virtual mobility on the consequent cross-border mobility aspirations remains unexplored.

The research project is concerned with the exploration of the potential connection between virtual student mobility experiences, attitudes towards the prospects of cross-border mobility and socio-economic status (SES) as well as personality traits of participating students.

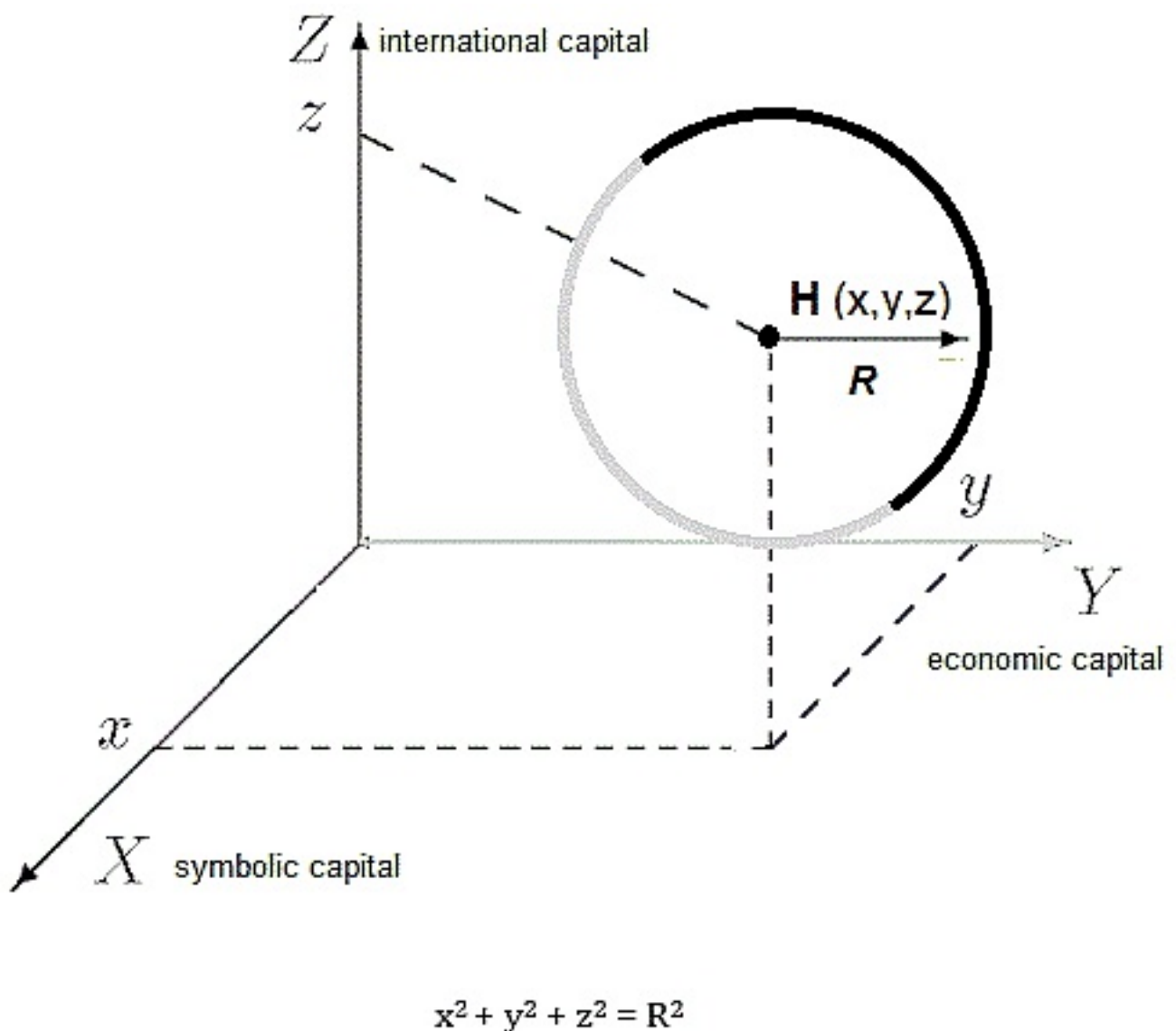
## Full paper

From a personal perspective, academic mobility can be defined as an “opportunity for self-realization and development of personal characteristics” (Kravtsova, 2014). Tran (2016) also re-conceptualizes student mobility as “becoming” through Bourdieu’s forms of capital and argues that it encompasses students’ aspirations for development. Such definitions frame academic mobility as a desirable pursuit of personal and professional growth. However, the decision process to become internationally mobile cannot be described through purely motivational lenses.

The existing literature exploring the decision-making process with regards to pursuing education in another country employs different vantage points. Most researchers view academic mobility as the outcome of individual decisions influenced by personal characteristics such as SES, gender, language competence, and personality (HEFCE, 2004; Christie, 2007; Findlay et al., 2006; Halsey, 1993; Daly, 2011). The perspectives range from an investigation of macro-level push-pull factors (Altbach, 2004; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Maringe & Carter, 2007) to the analysis of personality traits of those studying abroad (Li, Olsen & Frieze, 2013). At the individual level, there is also a body of research that focuses on 'mobility capital acquired prior to a transnational educational sojourn (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Alike similarly coined 'transnational' or 'cosmopolitan' capital (Weenink, 2007; 2008; 2014), this mobility capital is viewed as a prerequisite, enabler, and facilitator for deciding to pursue international education. In addition to the research on these catalyst factors, there are also studies into the barriers such as lack of information, specific personal circumstances, and lack of financial resources (Souto-Otero et al., 2013).

All the above represent the complexity and multi-levelness of factors that stir an individual in the direction of transnational studies. The factors considered, although conceptualised differently, can be grouped into 3 overarching categories: economic capital, symbolic capital (credentials and achievements), and international capital (social, informational, language). Personality traits, however, do not fit neatly with other factors despite their established importance.

The planned research uses Bourdieu's notions of field, habitus, and capitals as suitable for analysis of complex interconnected social phenomena and adaptable to better address changing and newly emerging situations (Mills, 2008; Naidoo, 2004). Using habitus as a perspective-changing vantage point allows looking simultaneously at social and individual levels of the decision-making process by positioning an empirical individual within an international education field mapped by its capitals: economic, symbolic, and international; for these are the capitals for which field's agents (individuals, universities, countries) compete.



**Figure 1.** Aspirations as horizon for action within international education field

The graph represents the interplay of various factors affecting study abroad aspirations, where:

- **H (x,y,z)** represents individual's habitus (as a combination of capitals he/she possess at a particular point in time (Crompton, 2008));
- **R** - personality traits positively correlated with decision to study abroad;
- **semi-circumference** - 'horizon for action' (Hodkinson, 2008) observable from an individual position within the field;
- **vector direction** – aspirations for capital gains.

The higher the person's habitus is by Z-axis (*international capital*), and the further it is from the origin of coordinates along X- (*symbolic capital*) and Y-axes (*economic capital*), the more advantaged the position is and the more 'routine' (Hodkinson, 2008) is the decision to participate in international academic mobility.

The question is whether virtual mobility experiences allow a person to advance within the field. For those positioned unfavourably, the opportunity to participate in virtual mobility may represent a 'turning point' (Hodkinson, 2008) as they are likely to accrue international and symbolic capitals through this experience and to occupy a more advanced position within the field. This might allow them to perceive international education opportunities as applicable to them and within reach thus making them more likely to seek such educational options, and even attempt to defy the gravity of low SES via scholarship schemes.

## Research design

As there is limited research into the topic, an exploratory sequential mixed-method research design is to be employed.

In the first phase, a qualitative exploration is to be carried out by collecting and analysing 20 semi-structured interviews on international and symbolic capitals of virtually mobile students from

Russia and Kazakhstan as well as the changes resulting from their virtual mobility experiences. Interviews will be supplemented by quantitative data in form of Family Affluence Scale III (Hartley, Levin & Curie, 2016) and MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et.al., 2007) to determine SES; and by the 44-item Big Five Inventory to assess personality traits (John & Srivastava, 1999).

The second phase will constitute the collection and cluster analysis of online surveys, the design of which will be informed by the results of the first phase.

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