



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL



Vol. 58/2024
A New Decade for Social Changes

PLUS
COMMUNICATION



International
Communication & PR

Increasing Motivation of Iranian Students to Continue Education in Germany. Challenges and Opportunities in Academia

Zahra Arzjani

Institute of Geography, Koblenz University, Germany

arzjani@uni-koblenz.de

Abstract. The emigration of educated individuals from Iran has become a prominent and multifaceted issue in recent years, eliciting diverse perspectives. Statistical analysis reveals a substantial surge in the number of Iranian students electing Germany as their preferred destination for higher education. Notably, the count of Iranian students studying in Germany has witnessed a more than threefold increase, soaring from 4,182 students in 2008 to 13,279 in 2023. Moreover, the student population has nearly tripled from 4,182 in 2008 to 11,573 in 2021, signifying a 45% surge compared to the preceding year. This prompts an inquiry into the factors underpinning Iranian students' preference for Germany. To delve into this phenomenon, a survey was conducted among Iranians residing in Germany. The survey outcomes reveal that the deteriorating living conditions in Iran, coupled with Germany's political stability and robust social welfare system, have played pivotal roles in motivating students and university graduates to pursue education abroad. Educational advancement emerges as a secondary consideration in their decision-making process.

Keywords. Iran, Motivation to immigrate, international education, Germany

Introduction

The phenomenon of emigration, particularly among educated and elite segments of society, has gained significant attention and sparked intense debates in recent years in Iran. While existing research has predominantly focused on Iranians leaving their country as refugees, there is a notable lack of comprehensive academic studies exploring the mobility of Iranian students. This article aims to provide valuable insights into the experiences and circumstances of Iranian students studying in Germany, with a specific focus on the opportunities available to them and the challenges they encounter.

It is now widely recognized and largely assumed that accessing higher education involves some sort of travel on the part of the student. As Finn and Holton (Citation2019) have argued: 'Higher education as a global entity has undergone dramatic changes'; 'these changes have played out most significantly about student mobilities, which have seen fundamental shifts in the ways students move at a range of spatial scales. However, a recent study by Najafabadi et al. (2021) examines the factors influencing academic-related migration of Iranian students to Portugal, highlighting the significant increase in professional immigrants since 2018. The study

also identifies advanced facilities and living expenses as influential factors for foreign students, particularly Iranians, choosing Portugal as their destination.

Previous studies have shed light on the motivations and challenges faced by Iranian students in German universities, revealing factors such as individual aspirations, career prospects, academic interests, cultural backgrounds, and personal goals. (Be'atrice Knerr, 2015¹) By building upon these foundations, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by conducting interviews with Iranian immigrants in professional and higher education institutions and universities, with the objective of understanding their motivation to continue their education in Germany (OECD, 2020²). I conducted at least one interview with each participant. Some of these interviews took place via online social media platforms, such as Telegram and WhatsApp, or over the phone, owing to time constraints and geographical distances. Additionally, several interviews were conducted in a face-to-face, in-person format.

Figure 1

Annual Change of Iranian Students Coming to Germany, 2008-2023

Source: The Federal Statistical Office in Germany

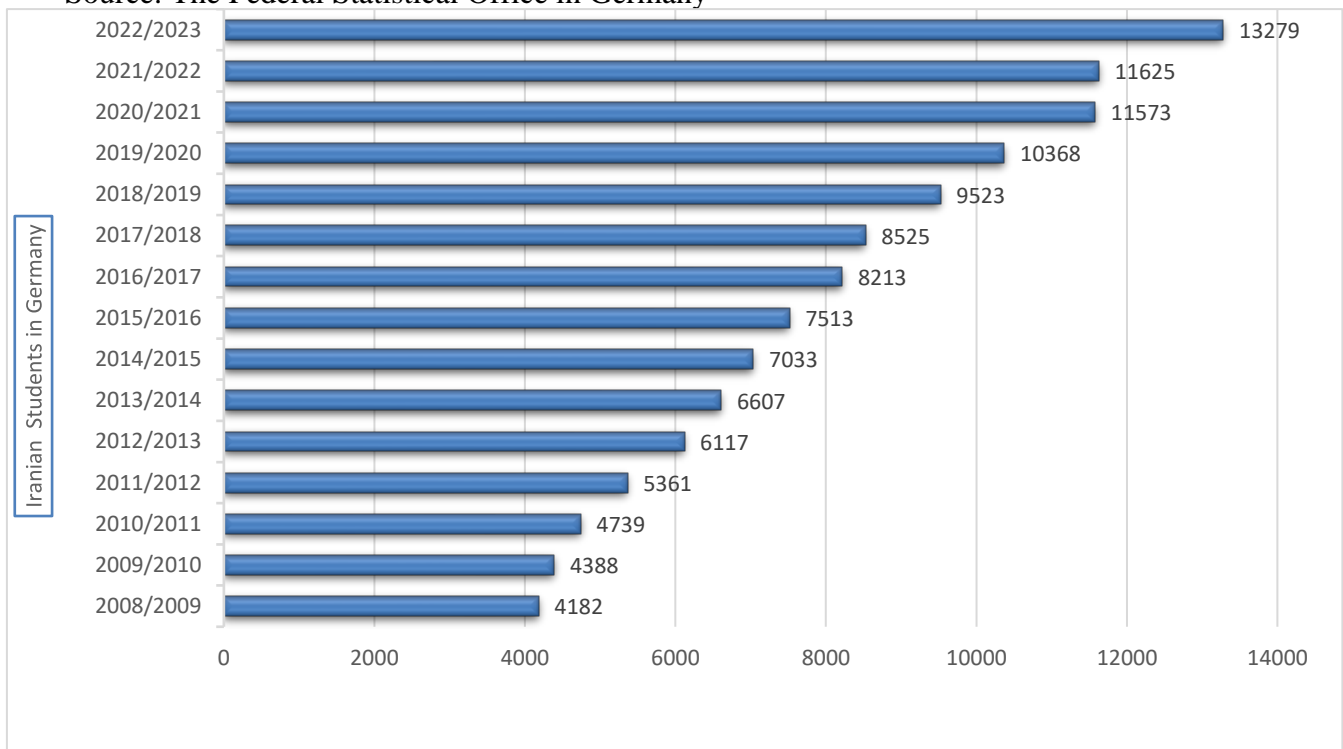


Figure 1 depicts the recent influx of Iranian professionals immigrating to Germany for master's programs and research positions, as evidenced by data from the using the Federal

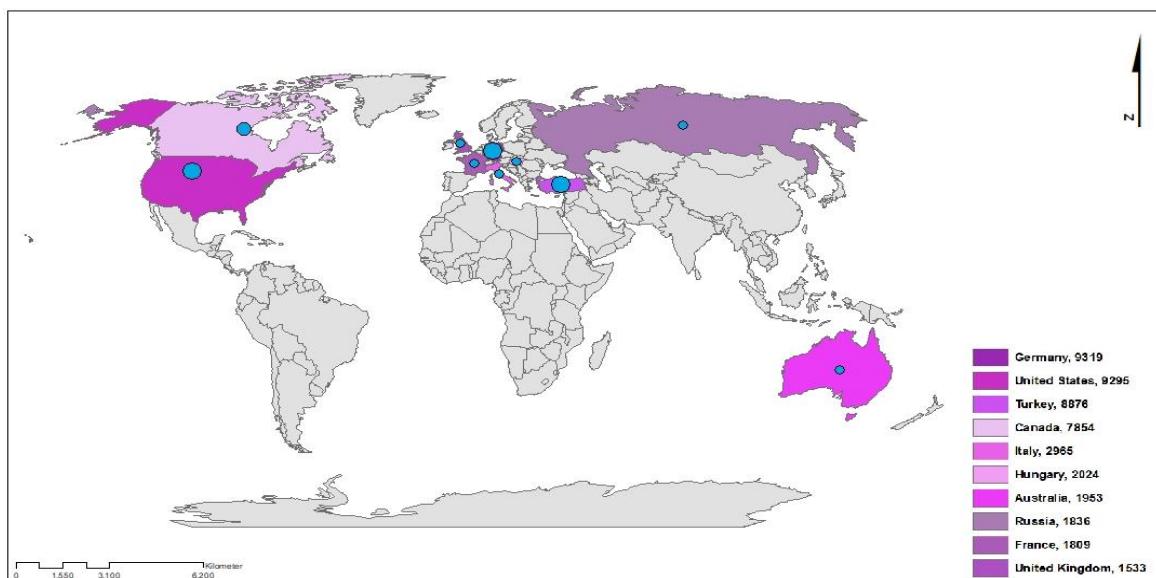
Statistical Office in Germany (Bundesamt Statistik). Notably, the number of Iranian students studying Germany has seen a more than threefold increase from 4,182 students in 2008 to

¹ Knerr, B. (2015) Asian students in Germany contexts of their studies, living conditions and future plans. *UniKassel Versit'a't Bibliothek*. doi:10.19211/KUP9783737600071.

² OECD. (2020). *How attractive is Germany for foreign professionals?* Migration Policy Debates, 23, January 2020. OECD Publishing.

13,279 in 2023. Among these students, approximately 52 percent are enrolled in engineering fields, 16 percent in mathematics and natural sciences, and 13 percent in law, economics, and social sciences.

Figure 2 Germany is a popular destination for both Iranian migrants and refugees (Hakimzadeh 2006), ranking first among the top group and surpassing both the USA and Turkey in 2022. Germany excels in all dimensions, particularly in the "quality of professional opportunities" category. In comparison to other countries, work opportunities for students are excellent, and tuition fees are very low. Notably, tuition fees are consistent for both domestic and international students.



(Open doors.2022 & UIS.2022)

Figure 2

Source: Authors' survey

While limited studies have explored student migration from Iran, existing research has primarily focused on refugees (Danış, 2006; Ghorashi, 2002; Jefroudi, 2014; Kelly, 2013; Koser-Akcapar, 2010; Mobasher, 2012), leaving a gap in academic investigations into Iranian student mobility. However, a recent study by (Najafabadi et al. 2022)³ examines the factors influencing academic-related migration of Iranian students to Portugal, highlighting the significant increase in professional immigrants since 2018. The study also identifies advanced facilities and living expenses as influential factors for foreign students, particularly Iranians, choosing Portugal as their destination.

³ Jahanian Najafabadi, A., Borhanizad, S., Akhavan-Safar, A., Barbosa, A. Q., & da Silva, L. M. (2022). The motivation of international mobility of Iranian students in Portugal: Challenges and limitations in academia. *U. Porto Journal of Engineering*, 8(1), 51-58.

Furthermore, Renani⁴ (2014) employs a dynamic panel data approach to investigate the determining factors of migration flows to Iran. The study finds that quality of life, institutional and political factors, and proximity play crucial roles in the decision-making process of emigrants, with increased distance correlating with decreased emigration from Iran.

To gain further insights into the experiences of Iranian students in Germany, the article "Iranian Students in Germany: Opportunities and Challenges" published by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in 2022 provides an overview of their circumstances. It highlights the quality of education, diverse academic programs, and research opportunities as attractive factors for Iranian students. The article also delves into the challenges faced by Iranian students, including language barriers, cultural adjustment, social integration, and the academic demands of the German educational system.

Müller and Rahimi⁵ (2021) contribute to the understanding of Iranian students in German universities by investigating their motivations and challenges. Their study reveals various factors influencing the decision to study in Germany, while also addressing language barriers, cultural adjustment, academic demands, social integration, and financial constraints encountered by Iranian students.

Moreover, a recent study conducted by Jahanian, N. and Borhanizadr⁶(2022) delves into the determinants of motivation among Iranian students. The study underscores the significance of individual aspirations, the accessibility of scholarships, Portugal's investments in its educational infrastructure, and the incentives aimed at attracting foreign students. These factors collectively contribute to the growing influx of Iranians immigrating to Portugal.

Additionally, a study by Zijlstra⁷(2020) focusing on Iranian immigrants reveals that a significant majority of Iranians gradually move from Turkey to Europe over a period of five years. While the choice of universities significantly impacts their migration trajectory, the overall trend aligns with the interest of Iranian students in Europe. Iran has experienced a substantial influx of immigrants in recent decades (Torbat, 2009). Iranians emigrate for various reasons, including residential opportunities, access to academic resources, and better job prospects in developed countries like Canada, Australia, the United States, and Europe, in pursuit of a higher quality of life (Ryazantsev, Afzali, and Rostovskaya, 2020)⁸.

Gi Yeon Koo (2023)⁹ analyzes the historical and social background of overseas migration in contemporary Iran and especially examines the phenomenon of upper-middle-class elite group's migration among the many branches of overseas migration in the country. He seeks to examine the Iranian's forms of migration and the social context.

Other migration studies identified a variety of push and pull factors underlying migration decisions of the overall population. For example, marrying a national from the host

⁴ Renani, M., Shirazi, H., & Sadeghi, A. B. (2014). Determinants of Iran's emigration flows: An application of the dynamic panel data approach. *Journal of Economic Research*, 49(2), 337-362.

⁵ Müller, G., & Rahimi, M. (2021). Understanding the motivations and challenges of Iranian students in German universities: A qualitative exploration. *Journal of International Education Research*, 10(2), 87-110.

⁶ Jahanian, N.A., Borhanizad, S. (2022). The Motivation of International Mobility of Iranian Students in Portugal: Challenges and Limitations in Academia. *U.Porto Journal of Engineering*, 8:1 (2022) 51-58

⁷ This dissertation includes small parts and two respondent quotes from the previously published article: Zijlstra, J. (2020) Stepwise student migration: a trajectory analysis of Iranians moving from Turkey to Europe and North America. *Geographical Research*, 58(4), 403-415.

⁸ Ryazantsev, S. V., Afzali, M., & Postovskaya, T. (2020). Current factors of Iran's brain drain, analysis, reasons and influences. *DEStech Transactions on Social Science Education and Human Science*, 199-209.

⁹ Koo, G.Y. (2023). The Choice for the "Zendegie Normal (Normal Life)": Changes Among Iranian Young Immigrants. *Social Change in the Gulf Region*, Gulf Studies 8.

country, social networks, and the quality of life were found to increase the stay rates (e.g., Arthur & Nunes, 2014)¹⁰

Recent studies in the domain of migration phenomena have delineated numerous pertinent factors associated with the underlying motivations driving educated and skilled Iranian university students, entrepreneurs, and elites to seek relocation abroad. However, what remains ambiguous is the predominant rationale behind the substantial the highest migration of Iranian students and intellectuals to Germany in 2022.

In this article, I aim to bridge the research findings on the augmentation of motivation among Iranian students to pursue further education in Germany with the insights gleaned from fieldwork conducted among Iranian students pursuing various academic levels, including PhD, master's, and bachelor's degrees, while residing in Germany. I endeavor to elucidate the diverse motivations propelling Iranians towards choices such as returning to Iran, remaining in Germany post-graduation, or relocating to another country. Drawing upon this analysis, I will offer astute observations regarding the potential ramifications of Iranian student mobility towards Germany.

Methods

In this research, an approach involving open-ended questions during interviews was employed. Open-ended questions offer students the opportunity to articulate their motivations and aspirations for pursuing international studies. When Iranian students contemplate the possibility of enrolling in German universities, they frequently contemplate a spectrum of factors, which they assess as both advantages (the high quality of education, the availability of tuition-free options, and promising research opportunities,) and disadvantages (language barriers, challenges related to cultural integration,).

Through interviews with Iranian immigrants in professional and higher education institutions and universities, this study aims to address the following specific research questions:

- a) Why do Iranian students choose Germany as their destination country for further studies?
- b) what are the advantages and disadvantages of German universities for Iranian students?
- c) Did you decide to return to Iran?

In order to foreground the study, an extensive literature search was conducted around these issues.

Participants

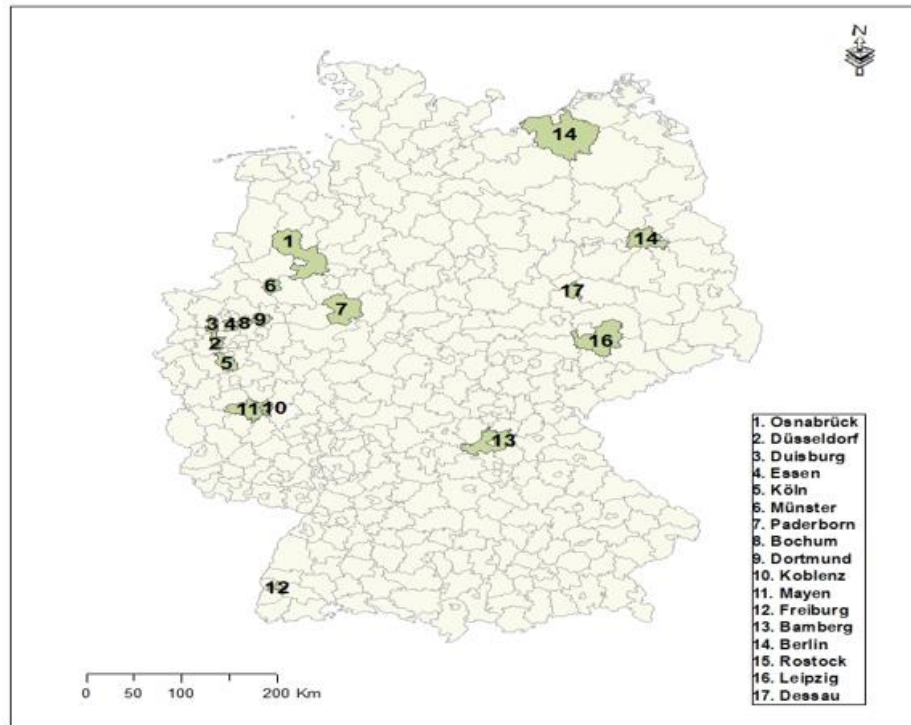
The present study investigates the increasing motivation of Iranian students to pursue education in Germany between the years 2012 and 2023. The research methodology was employed, utilizing interviews conducted with a total of 43 Iranian students, comprising both men and women, who are currently studying in Germany. In order to ensure diversity within the sample, participants were selected from various German universities and different geographic regions across the country (Figure 3).

¹⁰ Arthur, N., & Nunes, S. (2014). Should I stay or should I go home? Career guidance with international students. In G. Arulmani, A. J. Bakshi, F. T. L. Leong, & A. G. Watts (Eds.), *Handbook of Career Development* (pp. 587–606). Springer

Figure 3

Interviewed Students from Different Universities in Germany

Source: Authors' survey



Study Approach and Procedures

The study employed a rigorous approach to data collection, primarily utilizing semi-structured interviews complemented by detailed field notes. To effectively recruit participants, a combination of methods was employed. These methods included approaching potential candidates through Iranian student gatherings at the campus of Koblenz University, utilizing online social networking platforms such as Telegram and Facebook, implementing the snowballing technique, and leveraging personal contacts. This multi-faceted approach aimed to facilitate purposeful sampling, allowing for a diverse and inclusive sample of Iranian students in Germany. It is important to note that the majority of the interviewees hold master's degrees, which aligns with the prevailing trend among Iranian students. This trend underscores their significant preference for pursuing higher education at the master's and doctoral levels in Germany, driven by the favorable conditions offered to individuals with prior bachelor's degrees, thereby rendering the academic path in Germany more accessible and accommodating.

Regarding confidentiality and anonymity, all participants were provided with a clear explanation of the research goals and the conditions of participation. While most participants did not consent to having their interviews recorded using a tape recorder, comprehensive notes were taken during face-to-face and phone conversations. Open-ended questions were employed to encourage participants to share their life stories and perspectives. Throughout the research process, efforts were made to minimize interference and ensure a comfortable environment for the interviewees.

The data collected from the interviews and field notes were meticulously analyzed using Excel software. This coding process involved systematically categorizing and organizing the literal statements and quotes provided by the participants.

Most studies within the existing body of literature endeavor to elucidate the global flow of international students and the factors that influence their motivation to pursue education abroad. These investigations predominantly rely on a well-established theoretical framework known as the push-pull model. This framework explores the intricate interplay of "push" and "pull" factors, as documented by scholars such as Mazzarol & Soutar (2002)¹¹, Yue & LU (2022)¹². The push-pull model holds particular relevance when examining cross-border mobility, especially in the context of international student migration.

The components of this model play a pivotal role throughout an international student's decision-making journey, as underscored by researchers such as Baruch et al. (2007)¹³ and Mazzarol & Soutar (2002). Push factors encompass elements within the student's home country, including cultural, economic, political, and academic aspects. These factors pique the student's interest and serve as the catalyst for their decision to pursue international education. Conversely, pull factors are attributes associated with the host country, rendering it more appealing and influential in the international student's decision-making process, as noted by Mazzarol & Soutar (2002). Moreover, the push-pull model takes into account the influence of significant individuals in the student's life and the students themselves (Kim, 2011). Recognized for its efficacy in the identification process, the push-pull model remains highly regarded in scholarly discourse. This interview includes 10 questions about fundamental factors related to motivation to immigrate to Germany considering both studies and the residential aspects. The motivation of Iranian students to study in Germany has been scrutinized within the context of a multifaceted framework, considering both the advantages, such as tuition-free education, and the disadvantages, including political, economic, social factors. Additionally, participants were asked about their perspectives on the advantages and disadvantages of German universities and their decision-making process regarding returning to Iran.

The selection of research interviewees adhered to the following criteria:

1. They were Iranian nationals.
2. They had immigrated to Germany on a student visa.
3. Germany was their chosen destination for migration.
4. No more than ten years had passed since their migration.

It is important to note that the findings and conclusions derived from this research cannot be generalized to the entire population of Iranian students due to the limited sample size. Nevertheless, through purposeful sampling, conscientious efforts were made to ensure diversity within the sample, taking into account factors such as participants' backgrounds, genders, lifestyles, and the universities in which they were enrolled.

¹¹ Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), Push-pull" factors influencing international student destination choice. *International Journal of Educational Management* 16:82–90 DOI:[10.1108/09513540210418403](https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540210418403)

¹² Yue. Y& LU.J.(2022). International Students' Motivation to Study Abroad: An Empirical Study Based on Expectancy-Value Theory and Self-Determination Theory, Volume 13 - 2022 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.841122>

¹³ Baruch.Y, . Budhwar,P & hatri.N(2007). Brain drain: Inclination to stay abroad after studies. *Journal of World Business* 42 (2007) 99–112.

Finding and Discussion

Strengths and Weaknesses – Germany Universities

This research aimed to determine the factors influencing the increase in Iranian students' immigration to Germany. During the past decade, due to the imposition of sanctions against Iran and its subsequent inflation, economic restrictions have increased for the general public, especially for university students (Chamlou, 2016; Farzanegan, Khabbazan, & Sadeghi, 2016)¹⁴.

Table 1 presents an overview of the respondents' key personal characteristics. Among the participants, 53.5% identified as females, while 46.55% identified as males. In terms of age distribution, 72.1% fell within the 20 to 25 age range, whereas 27.9% were between 35 and 50 years old. Additionally, 14% of the respondents reported being married. The majority of the interviewed students had previously attended Iran University and possessed a bachelor's degree.

Table 1

Demographic Profile

Category		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	20	46.5%
	Female	23	53.5%
Marital Status	Married	6	14%
	Single	37	86%
Age	20-35	31	72.1%
	36-50	12	27.9%
Education	Bachelor's	3	7%
	Masters	36	83.7%
	Ph.D.	1	2.3%
	Medical Studies	3	7%
Total		43	100%

Source: Authors' survey

The decision to study overseas is driven by a multitude of factors that contribute to the choice of the destination country (see Table 2). findings indicate that a significant majority of participants (83.7%) identified the low cost of education in German universities as the primary motivation for emigrating to and selecting Germany as their study destination. Germany holds great appeal for Iranian students, as it offers the advantage of not charging tuition fees, although there have been debates in some German states regarding the introduction of tuition fees solely for non-EU students. Tuition fees play a crucial role in students' decision-making process when considering studying abroad (Table 2).

¹⁴ Farzanegan.M, Khabbazan.M & Sadeghi.H.(2016). Effects of Oil Sanctions on Iran's Economy and Household Welfare: New Evidence from A CGE Model. *Economic Welfare and Inequality in Iran* (pp.185-211). DOI:[10.1057/978-1-349-95025-6_8](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95025-6_8)

Table 2

Reasons for choosing Germany as the destination country (Multiple answers)

Reasons	All respondents (%)	Frequency
1. Low costs of education	83.7	36
2. Educational quality	37.2	16
3. Close distance to Iran	14.6	6
4. Having relatives in Germany	22	10
5. Obtain permanent residence in Germany (easier than the other country in Europe)	12.2	4
6. Other reasons	14.6	6

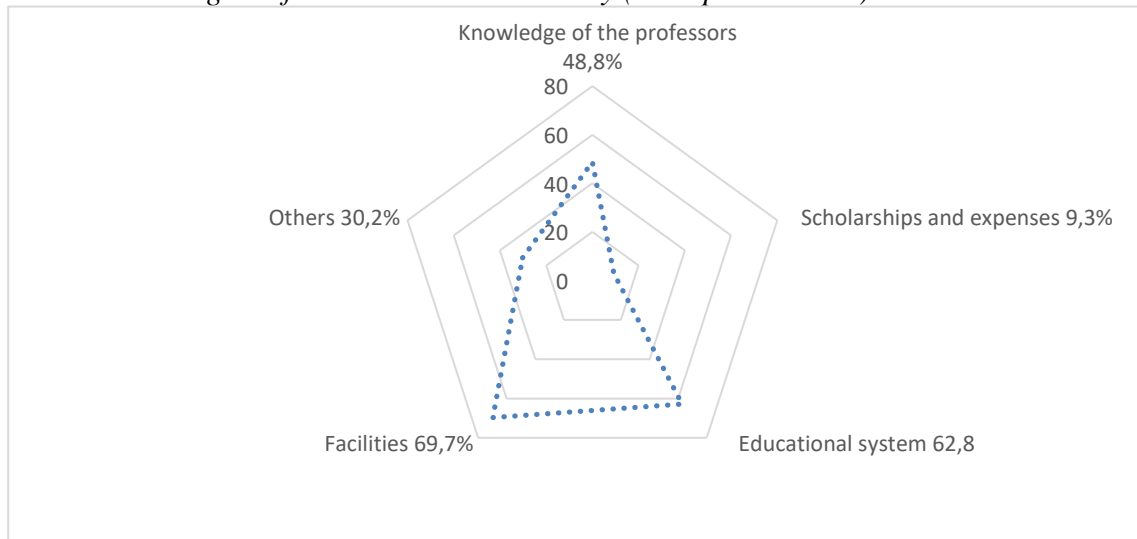
Additionally, the quality of education (37.2%) emerged as the second most influential factor. The combination of affordable education and high educational standards acts as a significant driver for individuals seeking educational opportunities outside their home country. Furthermore, Germany stands out among other nations due to the appealing prospects of finding employment in the German labor market, which attracts many foreign students who aspire to study and work in Germany. This is further facilitated by Germany's favorable work opportunities for students and remarkably affordable tuition fees.

Proximity to Iran, highlighted by the 14.5% noted in the table, appears to have played a significant role in the choice of Germany as a destination for Iranian student immigrants. With a travel time of approximately three and a half hours, Germany offers distinct advantages over the United States. Student immigrants prioritize the opportunity to maintain closer ties with their families at a lower cost and with quicker accessibility. Moreover, the data from the table indicates that having relatives in Germany (22%) influences the decision-making process. This suggests that students with at least one relative residing abroad or those who have experienced foreign travel exhibit a higher propensity towards migration.

The other reason is it can be said that Iranian students choose Germany because courses are regularly offered in English in German institutions. Germany offers a large number of postgraduate courses taught in English. The allowed working hours seem to be sufficient for students. Most of the interviewees were working at the same time as studying. The host country's environment is made up of three subcategories: Migration Policies, distance to Iran & family.

In Figure 4 participants reported some of the strengths of Universities in Germany that motivated them to continue their studies e.g., Knowledge of the professors, scholarships, expenses, educational system, facilities, etc. that impacted decision-making about immigration to Germany. Iranian students seemed to be influenced the least by recommendations coming from family, friends, professors, or scholarships and expenses. These factors scored low in students' decision to study abroad.

Figure. 4
The Main Strengths of Universities in Germany (Multiple Answers)



Other important factors influence the number of Iranian students in Germany. (Figure 4). The theme, academic requirement, consists of three subcategories: low tuition fees, and the high reputation of Germany's many universities. In addition to academic training, employment and future career prospects gain much attention when choosing German higher education

Since the revolution of 1979, approximately one million Iranians have departed from the country, with the primary destinations for immigrants being Germany, the United States, Turkey, and other nations. (M.AL.Sulami,2024)¹⁵ The student protests of 1999, known as the Kouye-e-Daneshgah protests, represented the first widespread and violent uprising in nearly two decades, potentially contributing to subsequent increases in emigration.

Another notable surge in Iranian emigration followed the tumultuous 2009 presidential election, characterized by even more intense protests compared to those of the student uprising a decade earlier. Moreover, the onset of the 2010s brought about an extended period of economic recession and political decay, overshadowing Iran's brain drain crisis.

During Khatami's presidency in the decades leading up to 2000, there was a gradual yet sluggish increase in the number of Iranian students studying abroad. The brain drain from Iran increased even further under the conservative president Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). Despite the publication of a IMF report in 2009¹⁶, stating that Iran had the highest level of brain drain among developing countries, Ahmadinejad categorically denied the fact that there was a brain drain. She also did not try to motivate educated Iranians to stay or to return to the country and blamed emigrants for lacking national attachment and religious faith (Karimi & Gharaati, 2013)¹⁷. The pervasive state control over the economy, coupled with widespread corruption and the allure of rent-seeking opportunities, has historically kept the returns on education and entrepreneurship in Iran relatively low.

¹⁵ Sulami. M. Al (2024) Economic, political factors driving increase in migration from Iran. International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah). X: @mohalsulami.

¹⁶ <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/ar/2009/eng/>

¹⁷ Karimi,N& Gharaati.(2013). Why Do Brains Drain? Brain Drain in Iran's Political Discourse. <http://cadaad.net/journal> Vol. 6 (2): 154 – 173 ISSN: 1752-3079.

Since President Rouhani came to power in 2013, he proposed more openness to the foreign world and called upon the Iranian diaspora to return home and help develop the country. He has put efforts in increasing the quality of Iranian education in order to keep students in Iran. Moreover, he also set up partnerships with prestigious universities in Europe and the US and called for more linkages with Western academics (ICEF¹⁸, 2014 Trines, 2017)¹⁹. The effectiveness of these measures is yet to be determined.

Overall, given the rise in migration among the lower social class, the Iran Migration Observatory considers that Iran is experiencing an “uncontrolled mass emigration” phenomenon. This new trend is a product of the deteriorating economic situation, as well as the suppression of dissent after every wave of protests inside Iran: the Green Movement of 2009, popular protests between 2017 and 2018, protests against the rise in oil prices in November 2019 and the “Women, Life, Freedom” protests that started in the fall of 2022 after the killing of Mahsa Amini²⁰.

However, In the recent political events (Mahsa’s Revelation) and civil protests in Iran (for six months), the migration process of Iranian students to Germany has increased. Most of the interviewees stated the problems of the country and the lack of guarantee for the future as the main reasons for their migration. The research findings indicate a significant proportion of young individuals aged 18 and above among the immigrant population, marking a departure from the previous decade when the average age of Iranian student immigrants was higher. Social connection has a strong positive, this is an important motivating factor influencing Iranian students’ choices. Besides, different from other Europe countries, Germany is a country with many large Iranian communities such as Norden Westfalen, and Berlin, The Iranian community in Germany can provide much help for Iranian students whose first language is not Deutsch. Four interviewees have expressed the sentiment that despite proficiency in the German language and possessing professional skills, Iranian immigrants face barriers to obtaining professional employment. Discriminatory hiring practices and unfair working conditions impede their career advancement. On the other hand, immigration to Western countries does not only serve utopian realities to Iranian immigrants. Not all Iranians with high educational backgrounds, who take up a considerable part of the overall immigrant population, can choose occupations in Germany that are compatible with their levels of education, and many suffer from mental and economic difficulties.

¹⁸ ICEF Monitor. (2014). Summing up international student mobility in 2014. <https://monitor.icef.com/2014/02/summing-up-international-student-mobility-in-2014/>

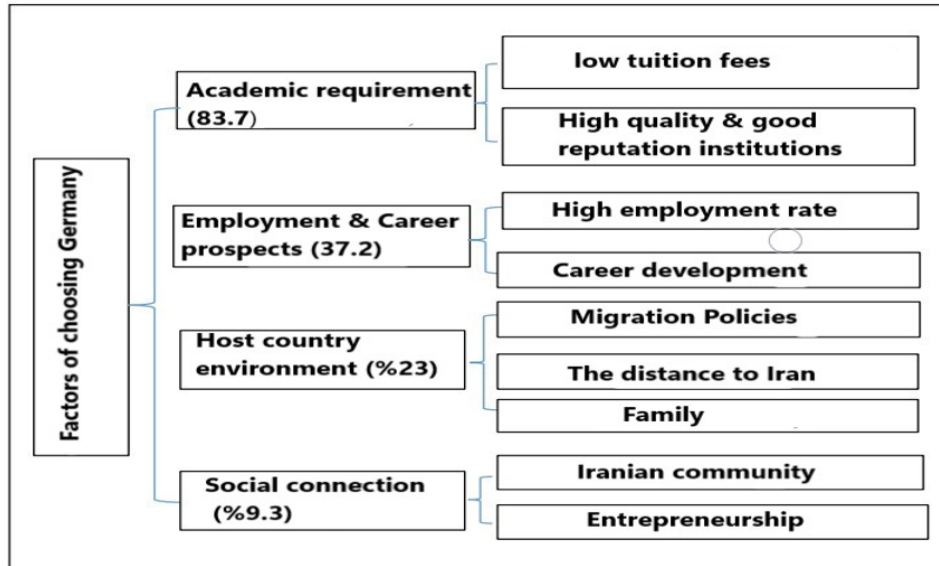
¹⁹ Trines.S.(2017). Lessons From Germany’s Refugee Crisis: Integration, Costs, and Benefits

²⁰ Sulami. M. Al (2024) Economic, political factors driving increase in migration from Iran. International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah). X: @mohalsulami.

World Education News & Reviews

,https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320130930_Lessons_From_Germany's_Refugee_Crisis_Integration_Costs_and_Benefits

Figure 5
Factors for Choosing German Higher Education



While academic universities in Germany offer many opportunities, they also face certain challenges through student surveys. According to a survey of the participants, students admitted to German universities after passing the IELTS were worried about finding a job after completing their studies. These students tended to stay in Germany and develop their research ideas if they found a suitable job that is in English. 51% of the interviewees with a German language C1/C2 were admitted to a German university and intended to obtain permanent residence in Germany. When asked if they would like to have German nationality, 83.7% answered “yes,” 11.6% said “no” and 4.7% had already obtained German nationality at the time of the survey.

Return to Iran

The desire to return and the rate of return are considered to be the most important indicators of migration. It should be noted that so far, no coherent study has been produced regarding the desire to return and identifying the drivers of return among Iranian immigrants (Iran Migration Observatory, 2022).

This section categorizes the respondents’ answers to the question, “Do you want to return to Iran?” Do participants in this research want to stay in their current host country, or return to Iran one day? Results from interviews show that those who have emigrated at least for now are not willing to return back to Iran, if the current social, political, and economic problems remain the same. It is very clear that the student’s motivation not to return to Iran and very closely connected to the reasons why she left Iran in the first place.

Table 3
Return Plans of the Participants

Initial Plans	Actual Decision
Stay in Germany	86%
Return to Iran	9.3%
Not sure	4.7%

There are both political factors (recent protests: women, life, and freedom) and work-related factors (lack of job opportunities, low level of salaries, gender inequality in the workplace) that have led to the migration of young individuals from Iran. 9.3% of the participants were positive about the idea of returning after a few years, while only considering returning under certain conditions, for instance, if the political and economic situation in Iran would improve or if they could find a good job there (Table 3). Participants from upwardly mobile and career-oriented families were a bit more open to returning than participants from academic-oriented families. Often, Iranian studying abroad do not return after graduation, instead putting their expertise to work in their countries of residence.

Despite the fact that a number of Iranians participating in this study recently immigrated (within the past six months) and faced a broad range of difficulties, they reported high levels of self-confidence and a higher quality of life and they have no desire to return to Iran.

Do You Want to Return to Iran or Not? Participants' Reflections on Returning to Iran

During the past 2 years, emigration has become a growing social phenomenon in Iran. Iranian students' enthusiasm to study in Germany is further driven by the social, economic, and political conditions in their home country. These conditions also influence a large share of them to not return home after graduation.

It is very clear that Hussain's motivations not to return to Iran and very closely connected to the reasons why she left Iran. Hussain's motivations for not returning to Iran are closely intertwined with the reasons that led to leave the country. As an elite student in the field of solar technology in Iran, Hussain did not receive any support from the Iranian government. Consequently, she decided to apply to a university in Germany, where she quickly received a positive response. Currently, actively involved in a significant solar research project, and holds the belief that Germany outpaces other countries in terms of research capabilities. The effectiveness of the German education system has played a pivotal role in student success, leading to a sense of fulfillment and contentment in Germany, making the idea of returning to Iran inconceivable.

Similarly, Kiarash, a Master's student in Biological Sciences studying at a university in Germany, faced challenges in Iranian laboratories due to a shortage of equipment, exacerbated by the economic sanctions and currency fluctuations. The inability of Iranian universities to import necessary equipment prompted him to immigrate to Germany. Recognizing Germany as one of the world's oldest countries, with five major biology centers in Cologne and Bonn, Kiarash chose Germany for its focus on the biology of aging.

These personal accounts highlight the practical reasons and opportunities available in Germany that influenced their decisions to pursue education and research in a more conducive environment compared to Iran.

The heightened interest in pursuing education in Germany in recent years is largely attributed to Iran's enduring economic challenges, spanning over fifteen years. A report by Financial Tribune on November 10, 2016, revealed that a survey of 232 students at the University of Tehran indicated that more than 64% of respondents were contemplating overseas migration for various reasons.

Emigration from Iran has undergone a significant shift, as individuals now have a clear intention to leave the country from the outset. Unlike previous emigrations, where the attractions of the destination country played a determining role in the decision, the current emigration behavior is primarily driven by repulsions and challenges within the country of origin (Iran Migration Observatory, 2022). The declining economic stability and erosion of basic freedoms, such as restricted access to the free Internet, coupled with challenging economic, social, and political factors, have been key drivers of immigration, particularly among the younger generation in Iran. Various factors have contributed to the recent increase in emigration from Iran, with a notable rise in the immigration of students. This leads to a stronger attachment to their new home and weaker ties to their country of origin. It is essential to consider both the motivations behind emigration and the challenges and opportunities associated with settling in a new country. For many Iranians, the aspiration to escape the day-to-day political surveillance and seek refuge in foreign countries represents a virtual escape from their reality

Conclusion

In this paper, I explored enhancing the motivation of Iranian students to pursue their education in Germany, drawing upon valuable insights gathered from fieldwork conducted among Iranian students at different academic levels—ranging from PhD to bachelor's degrees—currently residing in Germany. Additionally, I leverage an extensive dataset compiled from statistics published by the national governments and the Statistical Office in Germany to enrich my analysis. The interview results highlight several factors that attract students to Germany, including economic and political stability, job opportunities after graduation, and favorable country characteristics such as security and a safe environment, as well as economic growth. The affordable tuition fees in the German educational system, along with the availability of modern equipment and facilities on campus, act as enticing incentives for Iranian students to pursue their studies in Germany. Over the past decade, the number of Iranian students graduating to bachelor's and master's degrees in Germany has increased and reached its highest peak in 2022, while the desire of students to return to Iran has decreased. Collectively, suggest that Iran could lose generations of economic growth. To address this issue, a comprehensive approach is necessary, taking into account various factors contributing to migration, including geographic, environmental, and political considerations.

It is imperative for Iranian society to recognize brain drain as a pressing social issue and to proactively devise solutions to address the underlying social challenges that contribute to the exodus of talent. Rather than solely reproaching the younger generation for seeking opportunities beyond Iran's borders, the Iranian government should engage in sincere introspection. Understanding why talented young individuals opt for more arduous paths abroad and why they are disinclined to return home even upon completing their studies is essential for formulating effective strategies to mitigate brain drain.

Acknowledgments

The author of this study would like to express their sincere gratitude to all the Iranian students residing in Germany who willingly participated in the research and greatly contributed

to its success. The author would also like to extend their heartfelt appreciation to [Prof.Dr. Bernard Köppen] for providing valuable comments and guidance throughout the process of completing the questionnaire. Lastly, the author would like to express their appreciation to the anonymous referee whose thoughtful suggestions and feedback helped refine and strengthen the study.

References

- [1] Altbach, P. G., & Knight, J. (2007) The internationalization of higher education: Motivations and realities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(3-4), 290-305.
- [2] Arthur, N., & Nunes, S. (2014). Should I stay or should I go home? Career guidance with international students. In G. Arulmani, A. J. Bakshi, F. T. L. Leong, & A. G. Watts (Eds.), *Handbook of Career Development* (pp. 587–606). Springer
- [3] Annual Report of the Executive Board for the Financial Year. (2009). International Monetary Fund, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/ar/2009/eng/>
- [4] Bijwaard, G. E., Wang, Q. (2016). Return migration of foreign students. *European Journal of Population*, 32, 31–54.
- [5] Baruch, Y., Budhwar, P & hatri, N. (2007). Brain drain: Inclination to stay abroad after studies. *Journal of World Business* 42 (2007) 99–112.
- [6] Baumeister, R. F. (2016). Toward a general theory of motivation: Problems, challenges, opportunities, and the big picture. *Motivation and Emotion*, 40(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-015-9521-y>
- [7] Brezis, E. S., & Soueri, A. (2011) Why do students migrate? Where do they migrate to? *AlmaLaurea Working Papers*, 25. AlmaLaurea Inter-University Consortium.
- [8] Brown, R., & Kermani, F. (2019). Iranian students in Germany: Motivations, challenges, and coping strategies. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Studies*, 42(3), 301-325.
- [9] Chaichian, M. A. (2012). The new phase of globalization and brain drain migration of educated and skilled Iranians to the United States. *International Journal of Social Economics*, 39(1-2)18-38.
- [10] Farzanegan, M, Khabbazan, M & Sadeghi, H. (2016). Effects of Oil Sanctions on Iran's Economy and Household Welfare: New Evidence from A CGE Model. *Economic Welfare and Inequality in Iran* (pp.185-211). DOI: [10.1057/978-1-349-95025-6_8](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95025-6_8)
- [11] Hakimzadeh, Shirin. 2006. "Iran: A Vast Diaspora Abroad and Millions of Refugees at Home." Washington: Migration Policy Institute.
- [12] Hercog, M., & Van de Laar, M. (2017). Motivations and constraints of moving abroad for Indian students. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 18(3), 749–770. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-016-0499-4>
- [13] Haase, H., Franco, M. and Pedro, E. (2019) International student mobility in a German and Portuguese university: Which factors in the host institution matter? wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/ejed, 55, 292-304.
- [14] Huu Nghia, T.L. (2019) Motivations for Studying Abroad and Immigration Intentions: The Case of Vietnamese Students. *Journal of International Students*, 9(3), 758-776.
- [15] Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. (2023). Iran (Islamic Republic of). <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/iran>.
- [16] ICEF Monitor. (2014). Summing up international student mobility in 2014. <https://monitor.icef.com/2014/02/summing-up-international-student-mobility-in-2014/>



- [17] Jahanian Najafabadi, A., Borhanizad, S., Akhavan-Safar, A., Barbosa, A. Q., & da Silva, L. M. (2022). The motivation of international mobility of Iranian students in Portugal: Challenges and limitations in academia. *U. Porto Journal of Engineering*, 8(1), 51-58.
- [18] Johnson, M., & Hasanpour, S. (2020). Perceived challenges and opportunities of Iranian students in German universities: A survey-based study. *Journal of Comparative Education*, 35(2), 156-178.
- [19] Jöns, H., Meusburger, P., & Heffernan, M. (2017). *Mobilities of knowledge*. Springer.
- [20] Karimi, N. & Gharaati. (2013). Why Do Brains Drain? Brain Drain in Iran's Political Discourse. <http://cadaad.net/journal> Vol. 6 (2): 154 – 173 ISSN: 1752-3079.
- [21] Karimi, A., & Bucerius, S. M. (2018). Colonized subjects and their emigration experiences. The case of Iranian students and their integration strategies in Western Europe. *Migration Studies*, 6(1), 1-19.
- [22] Kanfer, R., Frese, M., & Johnson, R. E. (2017). Motivation related to work: A century of progress. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 102(3), 338–355. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000133>
- [23] Knerr, B. (2015) Asian students in Germany contexts of their studies, living conditions and future plans. *UniKassel Versit'a't Bibliothek*. [doi:10.19211/KUP9783737600071](https://doi.org/10.19211/KUP9783737600071)
- [24] Koo, G. Y. (2023). The Choice for the “Zendegie Normal (Normal Life)”: Changes Among Iranian Young Immigrants. *Social Change in the Gulf Region, Gulf Studies* 8, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-7796-1_15.
- [25] Migration Data Portal. (2021). Return migration. <https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/return-migrate>
- [26] Moghadam, A., & Jadali, S. (2021). Immigration and revolution in Iran: Asylum politics and state consolidation. *Migrants, Refugees, and Displaced Persons in the Middle East and North Africa*, 29(63), 21-41.
- [27] Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), “Push-pull” factors influencing international student destination choice. *International Journal of Educational Management* 16:82–90 DOI:[10.1108/09513540210418403](https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540210418403)
- [28] Müller, G., & Rahimi, M. (2021). Understanding the motivations and challenges of Iranian students in German universities: A qualitative exploration. *Journal of International Education Research*, 10(2), 87-110.
- [29] Nafari, J., Arab, A., & Ghaffar, S. (2017). Through the looking glass: Analysis of factors influencing Iranian student's study abroad motivations and destination choice. *SAGE Journals*, 7(2).
- [30] OECD. (2020). *How attractive is Germany for foreign professionals?* Migration Policy Debates, 23, January 2020. OECD Publishing.
- [31] Pinder, C. C. (2008). *Work motivation in organizational behavior* (2nd ed.). Psychology Press.
- [32] Polavieja, J. G., Reino, M., & Ramos, M. (2018) Are migrants selected on motivational orientations? Selectivity patterns amongst international migrants in Europe. *European Sociological Review*, 34(5), 570–588.
- [33] Renani, M., Shirazi, H., & Sadeghi, A. B. (2014). Determinants of Iran's emigration flows: An application of the dynamic panel data approach. *Journal of Economic Research*, 49(2), 337-362.

- [34] Ryazantsev, S. V., Afzali, M., & Postovskaya, T. (2020). Current factors of Iran's brain drain, analysis, reasons and influences. *DEStech Transactions on Social Science Education and Human Science*, 199-209. doi: 10.12783/dtssehs/icesd2020/34071.
- [35] Sulami. M. Al (2024) Economic, political factors driving increase in migration from Iran. International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah). X: @mohalsulami.
- [36] Schiller, N. G., & Faist, T. (2012). *Migration, development, and transnationalization: A critical stance*. Berghahn Books.
- [37] Shkoler, O., & Rabenu, E. (2022). The motivations and their conditions which drive students to seek higher education in a foreign country. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03619-5>
- [38] Simões Pereira, R. J. (2016). Challenges and opportunities of US student mobility: The case of the study in Portugal Network. Project submitted as partial requirement for the conferral of Masters in International Management.
- [39] Stitteneder, T. (2019). Einblicke in die internationale Migration: Chancen und Herausforderungen. *ifo Schnelldienst*, 10, 34-39.
- [40] Smith, P., & Khan, R. (2018). Motivation and expectations of Iranian students studying in Germany: A comparative survey. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 7(4), 104-123.
- [41] Trines.S.(2017). Lessons From Germany's Refugee Crisis: Integration, Costs, and Benefits
- [42] World Education News & Reviews:
- [43] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320130930_Lessons_From_Germany's_Refugee_Crisis_Integration_Costs_and_Benefits
- [44] Torbat, A. E. (2002) The brain drain from Iran to the United States. *The Middle East Journal*, 56(2), 272–295.
- [45] Torfa, M., Almohamed, S., & Birner, R. (2021). Origin and transit migration of Afghans and Syrians to Germany: The influential actors and factors behind the destination choice. *International Migration*, 60(3), 1-18.
- [46] Wolter, A. (2020). Migration and higher education in Germany. Inequality, innovation and reform in higher education, *Lifelong Learning Book Series*, 25, 39-57.
- [47] World Population Review (2023). *Iran population 2023 (live)*. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/iran-population>.
- [48] Yue. Y& LU.J.(2022). International Students' Motivation to Study Abroad: An Empirical Study Based on Expectancy-Value Theory and Self-Determination Theory, Volume 13 -2022 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.841122>
- [49] Zijlstra, J. (2020) Stepwise student migration: A trajectory analysis of Iranians moving from Turkey to Europe and North America. *Geographical Research*, 58(4), 403–415.