

# **Exploring the Decisions of Dominican Youth with Private Education to Study abroad: A Study on the Brain Drain Phenomenon in the Dominican Republic**

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Author:

Andrea Pérez Rodríguez

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**Author:** Andrea Pérez Rodríguez

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**Supervisor(s):** University Lecturer Jenni Tikkanen, Postdoctoral researcher Suvi Jokila

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**Abstract:** This study examines the factors that influence the decision of Dominican youth with private education to study and stay abroad. This research used a combination of the push-pull factor model and network-mediated migration theory. The push-pull model explains migration through negative "push" factors causing departure, and positive "pull" factors attracting to a new place. The network-mediated theory shows how social networks influence migration decisions and processes. By combining these theories, this research aimed to understand why Dominican youth decide to study and stay abroad, and whether they perceive their private education contributes to this choice.

A qualitative approach is used, incorporating semi-structured interviews with high school students planning to study abroad, master's students currently studying abroad, and master's students who studied abroad and now live there. A total of 11 interviews were conducted and analysed using reflective thematic analysis.

The findings reveal that the most common factors pushing Dominican youth to study abroad included lack of safety, poor quality education, societal disconnection and disappointment, and a saturated job market in their home country. On the other hand, attractive opportunities, new experiences, family ties, and superior education quality were the most common pull factors drawing them abroad. The study also identified four migrant networks that assisted the participants in the decision-making and migration process: family, friends, co-workers, and romantic partners. The family network was the most influential, providing financial aid, connections, living accommodations, and emotional support. The research found that participants did not perceive their private education as a significant influence on their decision to study abroad. However, it did function as a migrant network.

The study concludes that these push and pull factors may contribute to the brain drain phenomenon in the Dominican Republic. Most participants expressed a desire to stay abroad or were doing so at the time of the interviews. While the participants did not consciously recognize their private education as a factor influencing their decision, the broadened perspectives gained from their private education may have subtly played a role in their decision to pursue further studies abroad.

**Key Words:** Brain Drain, Migration, Private Education, Dominican Republic, Push-Pull Factor Model, Network-Mediated Migration Theory

## **Table of contents**

<b>List of Acronyms</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.1 The Phenomenon of Brain Drain</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1.1 Understanding Brain Drain	8
1.1.2 Brain Drain in the Dominican Republic	10
<b>1.2 Private Education in Dominican Republic</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2 Theoretical Background</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2.1 The Push-Pull Factor Model</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>2.2 Network-Mediated Migration Theory</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2.3 Factors Influencing International Student Mobility</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3 Methodology</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>3.1 Research Approach</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>3.2 Ethical Considerations</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>3.3 Sample and Context of the Study</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3.4 Data Collection</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>3.5 Data Analysis</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>4 Findings</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>4.1 What are the reasons for Dominican youth to study and stay abroad?</b>	<b>32</b>
4.1.1 Push and Pull Factors	33
4.1.2 How networks affected their decision to study abroad	42
4.1.3 Financial support: a determinant factor	46
4.1.4 Post-study plans: staying abroad or returning home	47
<b>4.2 How does Dominican youth perceive that their private education influenced their decision to study abroad?</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>5 Discussion and Conclusions</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>5.1 Limitations</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>5.2 Recommendations for further research</b>	<b>63</b>

<b>References</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Appendix 1 Interview questions</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Appendix 2 Privacy notice</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Appendix 3 Consent form</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Appendix 4 List of themes, sub-themes, and codes</b>	<b>83</b>

## **List of Tables**

<b>Table 1 Participants information</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Table 2 Interviews information</b>	<b>28</b>

## **List of Figures**

<b>Figure 1 Performance type by school sector</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Figure 2 Thematic map with themes and sub-themes</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Figure 3 Push factors identified during the interviews</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Figure 4 Pull factors identified during the interviews</b>	<b>37</b>

## List of Acronyms

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Full form</b>
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
CED	Coalition for a Dignified Education
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IIE	Institute of International Education
HSS	High school student
MSA	Master's student currently studying abroad
MSL	Master's students who studied and stayed living abroad
MSR	Master's student who studied abroad and returned to the Dominican Republic
MESCYT	Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology

# 1 Introduction

Every year, countless people leave their home countries in search of better opportunities. More than 280 million individuals have embarked on this journey for "opportunity, dignity, freedom, and a better life" (United Nations, 2022). Of these individuals, approximately 6 million are international students, currently pursuing tertiary education abroad (OECD, 2024). The trend of studying abroad can significantly impact both individuals and their home countries. Many individuals choose to study abroad intending to migrate after graduation (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This suggests that a significant number of highly educated individuals, who possess skills that could be beneficial to their countries of origin, frequently employ education as a conduit for permanent migration. This prompts the question: what drives these individuals to pursue education abroad and remain abroad?

Numerous studies have aimed to determine the factors driving global migration (Kainth, 2009; Lawan Ngoma & Wana Ismail, 2013; Y. Lee et al., 2017), including what prompts students to pursue international education (Javed et al., 2019; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Tran, 2016). However, these studies often focus on global trends and may not fully capture the unique circumstances and considerations of individual countries or regions.

This research focuses on the Dominican Republic, a small island country in the Caribbean known for its high emigration rate. Despite having one of the highest economic growth rates in the Caribbean and Latin America, many Dominicans choose to emigrate in search of better opportunities. According to the World Bank (2022), the Dominican Republic currently has a population of around 11 million people. Out of this population, approximately 2 million Dominicans live abroad (Albarrán, 2023). This indicates that 18% of the population currently resides abroad. This significant portion of the population living abroad makes the Dominican Republic an important case study for understanding the factors influencing emigration. Furthermore, there is a noticeable gap in research about the Dominican context, particularly regarding what motivates students to study and remain abroad, the target population of this study.

The study seeks to understand why Dominican youth choose to study and remain abroad and if they perceive their private educational background contributes to this decision. To guide the study, the following research questions will be addressed (1) What are the reasons for Dominican youth to study

and stay abroad? (2) How does Dominican youth perceive that their private education influenced their decision to study abroad?

This research focused on students in private education, due to the prevalence of this system in the country. A significant portion of the middle class opts for private education due to the perceived low quality of public schooling (Sánchez & Senderowitsch, 2012). The most recent statistics from the 2022–2023 school year shows that out of 10,567 schools in the country, 25.8% are private, compared to 74.2% in the public sector (Hoy Digital, 2023). Although the difference is not significant, it still means that 2 out of 10 students in the Dominican Republic attend private schools. Many of these individuals that attend private schools later choose to complete their tertiary education abroad, and eventually permanently reside there. This situation raises the question: Does private education influence this decision to study abroad?

In the field of migration studies, multiple theoretical frameworks have been proposed to explain the dynamics of individual movement, including international student mobility, across borders. This research employs a combination of the push-pull factors model and the network-mediated theory as a theoretical framework. The push-pull factors model identified attractors to certain locations (pull factors) and conditions that encourage individuals to leave their home countries (push factors) (Kainth, 2009; E. Lee, 1966; Y. Lee et al., 2017). This study seeks to determine the specific push and pull factors that motivate Dominican youth to study and stay abroad.

On the other hand, the network-mediated theory illustrates how social networks facilitate migration (Y. Lee et al., 2017; Wilson, 1994). This research will investigate whether and how these networks have influenced the participants' decisions and migration processes.

Furthermore, this research will integrate these theories to explore how Dominican youth perceive that their private education influences their decision to study abroad. The push-pull factors model will be used to identify the specific reasons motivating Dominican youth to study and stay abroad. The network-mediated theory will be used to understand how social networks influence these decisions. Private education will be examined as part of these migrant networks, to see if the students perceive it plays a significant role in their decision-making process

By merging these theories, an empirical analysis of the determinants of migration among students and the influence of networks on these decisions can be conducted. This analysis could provide insights into the brain drain phenomenon in the Dominican Republic and the perceived impact of private education on the decision to study abroad.

To gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, the following section examines the origins of the term 'brain drain' and its contextualization within the Dominican framework. Moreover, it provides a brief history on the development of private education in the Dominican Republic, demonstrating its significance and the role it plays in the country's educational sector.

## **1.1 The Phenomenon of Brain Drain**

### **1.1.1 Understanding Brain Drain**

The term "brain drain" was used for the first time by the British Royal Society to indicate the departure of scientists and technologists from the United Kingdom to the United States and Canada in the 1950s and 1960s (Cervantes & Guellec, 2002 as cited by Gibson & McKenzie, 2011). Over the years, the term has evolved to encompass more than just the emigration of individuals from Europe to the United States. Nowadays, brain drain is commonly defined as the permanent emigration of individuals from economically disadvantaged countries to wealthier nations, often associated with positive economic impacts for the receiving country and negative consequences for the country of origin (Breinbauer, 2007).

Since its inception, the term "brain drain" has seen a resurgence as a subject of study: between 2005 and 2009, there were 247 articles written about brain drain, which is approximately twice the number written in the previous 15 years combined (Gibson & McKenzie, 2011). This demonstrates the relevance and popularity that the topic has gained, highlighting the importance of studying it. Furthermore, this phenomenon can have a negative impact on the sending country. This underscores the importance of studying it to better understand it and identify actions that the sending country can take to mitigate it.

Brain drain can have negative economic, social, institutional, and demographic impacts on the countries from which the individuals are emigrating. The departure of highly educated and skilled workers can result in a direct loss of human capital (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). These individuals are crucial for the development and competitiveness of their home country. This depletion can obstruct economic growth and development. Moreover, the productivity of the country's economy may decline due to this



loss (Beine et al., 2008), potentially hindering technological advancement and innovation, both of which are vital for economic progress.

Regarding social and institutional impact, brain drain can result in a lack of skilled professionals, weaken institutions, and exacerbate social inequality. Critical sectors like healthcare, education, and technology often suffer from a shortage of skilled professionals due to brain drain (Arah et al., 2008). This scarcity can adversely affect the quality of services provided, further aggravating public health problems and restricting educational opportunities. Since highly skilled professionals are essential for the effective functioning of government, academia, and the private sector, their departure can weaken these sectors. This can result in inefficiencies and a decline in institutional quality (Bhagwati & Hamada, 1974). Moreover, brain drain can intensify social disparities within the country of origin (Lucas, 1988). Individuals with the financial capacity to emigrate typically originate from comparatively affluent families, resulting in a remaining population that is characterised by diminished resources and opportunities. This scenario can increase the divide between various social strata.

Brain drain can also negatively impact a country by leading to an ageing population. As the highly skilled individuals who emigrate are often young, their departure can hasten the ageing process of the population in their home country (Clemens, 2014). This demographic shift can heighten the dependency ratio, thereby putting a greater economic burden on the working-age population who are left to support the elderly. In extreme cases, prolonged brain drain can result in population decline. This can further harm the economy and diminish a country's ability to uphold infrastructure and public services.

The phenomenon of brain drain is shaped by a multifaceted interplay of individual, sociopolitical, and economic factors. Individual motivations often revolve around the pursuit of enhanced personal and professional prospects. Sociopolitical influences may derive from a quest for political stability or a higher standard of living. Economic determinants typically involve the desire for better educational opportunities and financial security. While these drivers can exhibit considerable variability across diverse contexts, they provide a common framework to comprehend the differential prevalence of brain drain across nations.

This study examines the reasons why Dominican youth decide to study and remain abroad, a critical aspect of understanding the brain drain phenomenon in the Dominican context. The lack of literature from this perspective provides an opportunity to enrich existing research and lay the groundwork for

future studies. The subsequent section explains the brain drain phenomenon within the context of the Dominican Republic.

### 1.1.2 Brain Drain in the Dominican Republic

The Human Flight and Brain Drain Index takes into account the economic implications of human migration (due to economic or political motives) and the potential effects it might have on a nation's progress (The Global Economy, 2023). Data from 2007 to 2023 was collected for 177 countries. The index ranges from 0 (lowest) to 10 (highest), with a higher index indicating greater human displacement. According to this index, the average score for the 177 countries included in the index was 5.17. The Dominican Republic scored 6.7, ranking it 39th. This is concerning as the country's average score surpasses the global average, placing it among the top 50 countries experiencing the highest rate of brain drain.

Compared to other Latin American countries, the Dominican Republic has one of the highest rates of brain drain (Dominican Today, 2020). The average rate in the region is 5.8 index points, while the country's average is 6.7 index points, as previously stated. In the region's ranking, the Dominican Republic ranks fourth, preceded only by El Salvador, Haiti, and Nicaragua (The Global Economy, 2023). Despite a decline from its peak of 8.5 index points in 2009, the current state is still alarming. Compared to the world average, the situation is even more critical. The Dominican Republic's high brain drain rate suggests that many skilled individuals are choosing to leave the country. This could potentially result in a shortage of skilled workers, impacting economic growth and development.

Over the past three decades, an estimated 14% of Dominicans have sought better prospects abroad, mainly in countries like Spain and the United States (United Nations, 2019, as cited in Morales & Rodríguez, 2022). Additionally, a Gallup survey indicates that half of the Dominican Republic's population wishes to emigrate (Contreras, 2023). These figures suggest a significant level of dissatisfaction among its citizens. Among the population emigrating from the country, the majority are young individuals. This is particularly concerning given that young people, who constitute 32% of the population, form the largest workforce subgroup in the Dominican Republic (Eves, 2023).

Youth unemployment, which refers to those young people between 15 and 24 years old who are unemployed, has been established as one of the reasons that exacerbate the brain drain phenomenon in

the Dominican Republic. In 2016, while the youth unemployment rate in Latin America and the Caribbean was at 17%, the Dominican Republic had the highest rate in the region at 29% (Eves, 2023). Low wages, in addition to unemployment, also serve as a demotivator for qualified young people, postponing their entry into the labour market. Economist Nicole Peña, a member of the Economy and Development Foundation's expert staff, suggests that the “low wages offered by the Dominican labour market could partially explain” the high rates of brain drain in the country (Dominican Today, 2020, para. 4). These factors, coupled with a lack of growth opportunities and job security, can lead skilled individuals to seek employment abroad, further exacerbating the brain drain issue in the Dominican Republic.

Given that the phenomenon of brain drain presents a significant problem in the Dominican Republic, this study aims to identify the factors motivating Dominican youth to study and remain abroad. To achieve this, we will explore a critical aspect of an individual's life – their educational background, specifically private education. The following section discusses the development of private education in the Dominican Republic and its connection to the phenomenon of brain drain.

## **1.2 Private Education in Dominican Republic**

Countries with lower investment in public education, such as the Dominican Republic, often exhibit elevated enrolment rates in private schools (Sánchez & Senderowitsch, 2012). According to Edwards Jr. and colleagues (2020), the shift towards privatization in the Dominican educational system was not a deliberate strategy, but rather an inadvertent outcome of long-standing government policies. Between the 1970s and 1995, public spending on education rarely exceeded 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), leading to the emergence of low-cost private schools (Flores, 1997; Verger, Moschetti & Fontdevila, 2017, p. 42 as cited in Edwards Jr. et al., 2020). These schools proliferated, particularly in marginalized urban areas where public schools were unable to accommodate all students.

During this period, the Dominican education system faced the issue of overpopulated classrooms. Public schools often had to offer three shifts to accommodate the large number of students, sometimes reaching 50–60 students per class (Gilberti, 2013, as cited in Edwards Jr. et al., 2020). Despite efforts to meet the high demand, public schools in Santo Domingo were only able to cover 50% of students at the basic level of education in 1995 (Flores, 1997).

The lack of government investment in the education sector led to the passing of several laws aimed at increasing public funding for education. In 1997, the new General Education Law 66-97 was established, which called for a drastic increase in education funding (Edwards Jr. et al., 2020). However, by 2010, the investment in education was still far from reaching 4% of GDP. It is important to note that the rate did increase in the 2000s, reaching 2.7% in 2002, but soon decreased again, ranging from 1.4% in 2004 to 1.9% in 2009 (Morrison, 2016). After years of frustration, the social movement Coalition for a Dignified Education, also known as CED (in Spanish, *Coalición por una Educación Digna*) demanded that 4% of GDP be invested in education.

During the presidency of Danilo Medina (2012–2020), the public education sector received a substantial increase in funding from the government. In its inaugural year, Medina's government dedicated 4% of the GDP to education, representing a substantial increase of 70% from the previous budget allocation (Edwards Jr. et al., 2020). This increase of resources facilitated the execution of educational policies, which had previously been hindered due to lack of budget. Following the budget increase, several educational policies were implemented. The initiatives implemented after the budget increase included the Extended Day program (In Spanish *Jornada Extendida*) that prolonged the school day from 8AM to 4PM, infrastructure development such as construction of new schools or renovation of old ones, recruitment of additional staff, curriculum reform, technical-professional training, and teacher training (Hamm & Martínez, 2017).

Despite these reforms, a significant gap remains between policy and practice in the Dominican education system. The quality of the system has seen little improvement over the last two decades. This stagnation has further widened the divide between the private and public sectors, leading to an increase in private schools.

This disparity is evident in the PISA scores. When comparing the results from 2015 and 2018, it was found that students in private schools outperformed their counterparts in the public sector by a significant margin. According to Curiel and colleagues (2020), 42% of students in the private sector are above level 2, while only 17.2% in the public sector reach this level. As shown in Figure 1, the gap between the students in the private and public sector is visible. This highlights the disparity in education quality and the intrinsic link between a student's educational performance and their socio-economic status.

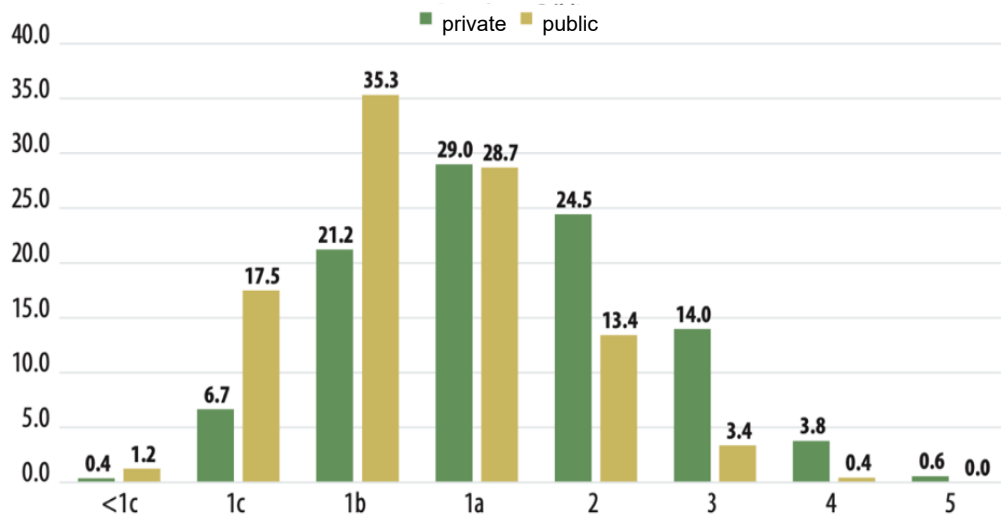


Figure 1 Performance type by school sector

From *República Dominicana en PISA 2018: Informe nacional de resultados [Dominican Republic in PISA 2018: National report of results]* (p. 23), by Curiel et.al, 2020, Instituto Dominicano de Evaluación e Investigación de la Calidad Educativa.

Despite some improvements over the years, the Dominican Republic's PISA scores still fall notably below the OECD averages. In the 2018 PISA results, the Dominican Republic ranked 77th out of 78 participating countries, and despite some improvement by 2022, it remained among the lower-performing countries, ranking 80th out of 81 (Avvisati et al., 2019; OECD, 2023b). The significant outperformance of private school students compared to public school students suggests a potential growth in private schooling, as parents seek a higher quality of education for their children.

According to the Dominican Association of Teachers (ADP), the 2023–2024 school year saw a 1% increase in public sector enrolment and a 45% increase in private sector enrolment, equating to 175,389 new students in private schools compared to 24,023 in public schools (Reyes, 2023). According to the study, over 100,000 students were compelled to seek admission in the private sector due to the insufficiency of available slots in the public sector. Moreover, the study uncovered that the deficiency of teachers and staff has led parents to consider private schools for their children's education. The study also found other issues in the public sector, including mistakes in textbooks, problems with technical equipment, and limited internet access (Reyes, 2023). Given the private sector's shortcomings in meeting the educational demands of the populace, it is understandable that parents in the Dominican Republic often turn to private institutions to ensure their children's educational needs are met.

Considering the pronounced disparity between private and public education within the Dominican Republic, this study aimed to examine the viewpoints of Dominican youth within the private educational sector, as they provide a distinct perspective. Additionally, given that the "middle class possesses the financial ability to pursue tertiary education overseas" (Amber, 2022, para. 4), this research is particularly focused on Dominican youth who have received private education, as they typically possess greater financial resources compared to their peers in the public sector.

## 2 Theoretical Background

In the field of migration literature, various theories have been suggested to explain why migration occurs and its effects. The initial studies of migration were heavily influenced by two theoretical standpoints: the neoclassical theory and the push-pull factor model.

The neoclassical theory suggests that migration results in an optimal distribution of production factors, benefiting both the sending and receiving countries (De Haas, 2010a). This theory emphasizes the rational decision-making processes of individuals and the economic factors prompting migration.

The origins of the neoclassical theory can be traced back to classical economic theories and it has evolved over time to become a cornerstone of migration studies. This theory was built upon the work of early economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo, who laid the groundwork for understanding labour mobility in the context of economic development and market function. Smith (1776) discussed labour movement as a response to wage differentials across regions and suggested that individuals acting in their self-interest would result in an efficient allocation of resources, including labour, emphasizing that labour mobility was crucial for economic efficiency and development. Ricardo (1817) indirectly supported the concept of labour mobility through his theory of comparative advantage. Even though his focus was on international trade, the implications for labour mobility were evident: workers would migrate to regions or countries that highly value their labour, thereby optimizing economic output.

The neoclassical theory of migration, as it is known today, developed significantly during the 20th century. This development was influenced by the broader neoclassical economic framework, which emphasizes rational choice and market equilibrium. Harris & Todaro (1970) extended the theory to address rural-urban migration in developing countries. Their model, known as the Harris-Todaro Model, introduced the concept of expected income, suggesting that migration decisions are based on the expected rather than actual wage differentials between rural and urban areas. With this model, they highlighted that migration would occur as long as the expected urban income, adjusted for the probability of finding a job, exceeded rural income

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urban migration in developing countries. Their model, known as the Harris-Todaro Model, introduced the concept of expected income. It suggests that migration decisions are based on expected wage differentials between rural and urban areas, rather than actual ones. They pointed out that migration would occur if the expected urban income, adjusted for the job-finding probability, exceeds the rural income.

Massey and colleagues (1993) expanded the neoclassical framework by incorporating elements such as human capital, which includes skills and education, and highlighting the role of information in migration decision-making processes. However, the theory has faced criticism for its assumptions of perfect information and rational decision-making, which may not always apply in real-world scenarios. Critics argue that the neoclassical theory simplifies the complex nature of migration, which can also be affected by social, cultural, and political factors (Massey et al., 1993). While the neoclassical theory offers a fundamental understanding of migration, it is essential to incorporate other theoretical perspectives that account for a more diverse array of factors influencing migration.

## **2.1 The Push-Pull Factor Model**

In contrast to the neoclassical theory, the push-pull factors model suggests extra considerations for migration decisions. This model has its roots in migration theories, initially formulated by geographers and sociologists during the mid-twentieth century. The model is deeply entrenched in the wider field of human migration studies and serves to explain why individuals relocate from one location to another.

British demographer Ernest Ravenstein was among the first to attempt explaining migration patterns. He proposed several "laws of migration", suggesting migration is influenced by distance, economic conditions, and social factors (Ravenstein, 1885). This foundation paved the way for later theories categorizing migration drivers, like the work of American sociologist Everett S. Lee. Lee developed the well-known push-pull model, expanding on Ravenstein's ideas. He categorized migration influences into "push" and "pull" factors. According to Lee (1966), push factors were defined as negative aspects causing people to leave their place of origin and pull factors as positive aspects attracting people to a new location. The interaction of these factors frequently culminates in individuals deciding to emigrate from their home countries.



In 2003, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) published its second *World Migration Report*. According to the IOM, this report "presents one of the most complete records of reference data and background analysis on population movements" (International Organization for Migration, 2003, para. 1). The report identifies several push factors driving migration, such as poor service conditions, talent displacement, underemployment, insufficient research facilities, disregard for local talent, corruption, limited access to quality education, low wages or salaries, human rights abuses, political instability, inefficient institutions, discrimination in hiring and promotion, and the aspiration for a better urban lifestyle.

Kainth (2009) listed several pull factors, including better economic prospects, better career expectations, modern educational systems with better opportunities for higher qualifications, better working conditions and employment opportunities, availability of experienced and supporting staff, technological gaps, higher salaries and income, better research facilities, prestige of foreign training, intellectual freedom, relative political stability, presence of a rich scientific and cultural tradition, and substantial funding for research.

Over the years, researchers have refined and extended the push-pull factors model to better capture the complexities of migration. They have incorporated additional factors such as personal aspirations, family influences, and global economic trends.

While the push-pull factors model continues to wield a significant influence in the realm of migration studies, it has not been immune to criticism. Critics argue it reduces complex migration decisions to a set of static factors and fails to capture the intricate and dynamic nature of migration. For example, Skeldon (1990) points out that the model lacks a comprehensive framework for integrating various factors, making it overly simplistic and ineffective for understanding real-world migration patterns. Similarly, De Haas (2010a) observes that these models overlook how structural forces such as inequality, state policies, and historical contexts actively influence migration processes.

Therefore, given the intricate nature of these issues and the multifaceted dimensions they encompass, scholars and theorists have felt the need for the development of more comprehensive theories. One such alternative that has been proposed to handle these complexities is the network-mediated migration theory. This theory attempts to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the migration

process, taking into account the complex social networks and dynamics that often influence individuals' decisions to migrate.

## **2.2 Network-Mediated Migration Theory**

The network-mediated theory, often referred to as "network theory" or "migration network theory," explains migration as a process significantly influenced by social networks (Massey et al., 1999; Portes, 1995). This theory posits that migrants rely on networks of family, friends, and community members to facilitate their movement and integration into new environments.

Migrant networks are defined as “interpersonal ties that connect family, relatives, friends, and community members in the places of origin and destination” (Y. Lee et al., 2017, p. 227). These connections can significantly reduce the perceived risks and costs of migration by providing crucial information, financial assistance, and emotional support.

The origins of network-mediated theory are rooted in sociological studies of social capital and networks. This theory expanded upon prior research on migration that only considered static factors, overlooking elements like social networks that aid migration. Granovetter (1973) was an early advocate of this theory, highlighting the role of social networks in job hunting and social mobility. He suggested that weak ties (acquaintances rather than close friends) are vital because they act as conduits to new information and opportunities not accessible within one's immediate social circle. This idea set the foundation for understanding how social networks enable access to the resources and information necessary for migration.

Massey and colleagues (1999) made significant contributions to the network-mediated theory in the field of migration. Their research showed that migration decisions are strongly influenced by social networks that connect immigrants in the destination country with prospective immigrants in the country of origin. They developed the concept of cumulative causation, suggesting that each migration act changes the social context, thereby increasing the likelihood of subsequent migration (Massey et al., 1999). This phenomenon results in chain migration, wherein a network of migrants encourage and support new immigrants, establishing a self-sustaining cycle of migration.

Portes (1995) expanded the theory by contributing notably to the understanding of how social capital affects migration. He integrated the concept of social capital into migration studies. His work clarified how networks of relationships among migrants provide access to valuable resources. These resources facilitate the migration process and help migrants adapt to new environments.

Social capital refers to the benefits individuals derive from their social networks, which includes access to information, financial assistance, and emotional support (Portes, 1995). Portes maintains that migrants use their social capital to reduce the expenses and risks related to migration, thereby enhancing their chances of successfully integrating into the host society.

He describes how these networks supply vital information about job prospects, housing, legal rights, and other essentials that help migrants overcome the challenges of relocating to a new country. As for financial aid, Portes explains how migrant networks often have mechanisms for financial support like remittances or informal loans, which can be crucial to cover the initial costs of migration. Lastly, these social networks provide emotional and psychological support, by assisting migrants in handling the stress and isolation that can accompany moving to a new environment (Portes, 1995). This underscores the crucial role these networks play in facilitating migration and settling in a new country.

This study utilized the push-pull factor model to identify the factors influencing Dominican youth to pursue education and subsequent residency abroad. This encompassed an examination of both the push factors prompting departure from their home country and the pull factors attracting them towards foreign education. Understanding the complexity of migration decisions and the multiple factors influencing them, the study also integrated network-mediated theory. This theoretical approach enabled the identification of migrant networks that facilitated the participants' decision to study abroad and supported their migration process. Additionally, the study sought to comprehend the social capital provided by these networks during these processes and its effect on the individuals' migration experiences.

### **2.3 Factors Influencing International Student Mobility**

UNESCO Institute for Statistics (n.d.) defines “internationally mobile students” as “individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in the country of destination, where the country of destination of a given student is different from their country of origin” (para. 1). Similarly, the Institute of International Education (2017,

2018) describes international student mobility as the cross-border movement of students seeking educational experiences, driven by the aspiration for quality education, improved career opportunities, and personal development.

Over the past two decades, the number of international students enrolled worldwide has more than doubled, with currently 6 million students pursuing higher education in a country different from their own (OECD, 2023a, 2024). This trend is a testament to how education has become a significant gateway to migration for numerous young individuals. The rise in wealth within developing economies has led the offspring of the expanding middle classes to pursue educational prospects overseas (OECD, 2023a). Specifically, the discrepancy between the high demand and limited supply for tertiary education spots in their domestic setting has led these students to pursue international education (Cao and Tran 2014, as cited in Tran, 2016).

As discussed in the preceding sections, a complex interplay of push and pull factors drive the phenomenon of migration. This is not exclusive to labour or economic migration; it also deeply influences educational migration, particularly the mobility of international students. Much like general migration trends, international student mobility is driven by a multitude of push and pull factors (UNESCO, 2013, as cited in Javed et al., 2019). This decision-making process for studying abroad involves a three-stage model, where push and pull factors interact. Students first decide to study internationally due to push factors, then select a study destination because of pull factors, and finally choose a specific higher education institution within their chosen destination (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002 as cited in Lauermaun, 2012). Numerous scholars and researchers have identified and analysed a variety of factors in line with the push-pull model. These factors can include personal aspirations, academic opportunities, socio-political conditions, and economic prospects in both home and host countries. These various push and pull factors are driving the significant increases seen in international student mobility, contributing to its emerging trend within the broader context of global migration.

McMahon (1992) identified push factors such as the level of economic wealth of the student, the degree of involvement of the developing country in the world economy, the priority placed on education by the government of the sending country, and the availability of educational opportunities in the home country. Additionally, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) found that students are motivated to study abroad by other push factors, including the perception that an overseas degree is superior to a local one, difficulty in

gaining admission to local study programs, and the unavailability of their preferred study program in their home country. Furthermore, the OECD (2023a) added to this list, citing push factors like the desire to acquire skills not taught at home, viewing studying abroad as a first step towards migrating to another country in the long term, and a lack of high-quality higher educational institutions at home.

In terms of pull factors, it appears that a student's selection of a host country for their studies is influenced by the reputation or standing of the prospective study destination (Kinnell, 1989, as cited in Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Many countries destinations like the United States or Europe are attractive for international students due to the reputation of their educational institutions and societies.

Other authors have identified additional pull factors. For instance, McMahon (1992) highlighted factors such as the relative sizes of the student's home country economy compared to the host country, economic links between the home and host country, host nation political interests in the home country through foreign assistance or cultural links, and host nation support of international students via scholarships or other assistance. Similarly, Javed et al. (2019) noted that pull factors driving students to pursue higher education abroad include high-quality education systems, opportunities for growth and development, higher paying careers, future job security, value-added reward systems, diverse academic opportunities, immigration, better quality of life, and chances to work in the global employment industry.

The push and pull factors that drive international student mobility bear a notable resemblance to those previously mentioned in the discussions about migration. This parallel suggests a convergence between the factors motivating individuals to migrate and those influencing their decision to study abroad. This overlap might indicate a broader pattern, wherein primary drivers for significant life choices, such as relocation or the pursuit of higher education, are frequently interconnected and mutually influential.

### **3 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Approach**

This study used a qualitative approach to investigate why Dominican youth choose to study and stay abroad, and whether they perceive their private education influences this decision. Fraenkel and colleagues (2012) defined qualitative research as studies that "investigate the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials" (p. 426). Given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the aim of the study, this approach was selected. As this study seeks to examine the relationship between Dominican youth's motivations to study and stay abroad and their private educational background, a qualitative approach is best suited to describe this relationship and determine if there is a pattern or connection between these two and the phenomenon of brain drain in the Dominican Republic.

The decision to study abroad and remain in abroad is influenced by a complex interplay of personal, social, economic, and cultural factors. Qualitative methods are ideal for investigating complex phenomena as they facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the problem or issue being studied (Creswell 2013). Given the complex interplay between the push and pull factors influencing this decision, and the social network, qualitative research was chosen to capture these interactions. Furthermore, qualitative research provides insights into the context of decision-making (Maxwell, 2012). Understanding the socio-cultural and institutional context is crucial to comprehend how and why social networks influence students' decisions to study abroad and possibly remain there.

Additionally, qualitative research emphasizes the participants' perspectives, letting them express their motivations, experiences, and perceptions in their own terms (Patton, 2015). This approach is particularly important for understanding the subjective aspects of decision-making processes related to studying and living abroad, as well as their perceptions of how private education influences these decisions. Thus, this method provides a deeper insight into the personal experiences and feelings of the participants, offering a more holistic view of the phenomenon.

#### **3.2 Ethical Considerations**

During the interview process, each participant was provided with detailed information about the purpose and objectives of the research. The researcher carefully explained to them how their personal data would

be used and protected throughout the study. It was emphasised that their involvement in the research was entirely based on voluntary participation. The researcher communicated that they had the complete freedom and right to withdraw their participation from the study at any point, without any repercussions or negative consequences. All these measures were taken to ensure the ethical conduct of the study.

In order to safeguard the identities and personal information of the participants involved in the study, a process of anonymization was implemented. This involved the utilization of a pseudonym by the researcher when detailing the findings of the study. This measure was taken to ensure that identities were not inadvertently revealed. Furthermore, any pieces of information that could potentially be used to identify participants, such as unique personal details or specific characteristics, were omitted. This process underscored the commitment to participant confidentiality and privacy.

Additionally, the video recordings and transcripts of the interviews were stored in an encrypted file on the SeaFile web drive. These files are protected with a username and password that only the researcher has access to. This measure ensures the confidentiality and security of the data collected during the research, safeguarding the privacy of the participants and maintaining the integrity of the research process.

As the primary investigator of this study, the researcher's positionality is crucial. It may influence the research process and the interpretation of findings. The researcher is a Dominican individual studying abroad with a private education background, thus directly experiencing the brain drain phenomenon being studied. Similar to some participants, the researcher has chosen not to return to the Dominican Republic after completing her studies. This unique background provides insights and understanding of the motivations and experiences of Dominican youth who decide to study and remain abroad. The shared cultural background with the participants can be advantageous, allowing a deeper appreciation of the cultural nuances, societal norms, and specific challenges that Dominican students encounter.

However, these personal experiences could also influence the interpretation of the participants' narratives. The researcher's close alignment with the subject matter, due to their personal journey and decisions might result in conscious or unconscious bias.

One such bias could be empathy and identification. The researcher might strongly empathize with participants who share similar backgrounds and motivations, which could lead to an overemphasis on certain themes that resonate with the researcher's own experiences.

Another bias could be perceived justification. The decision the researcher made to stay abroad might subconsciously influence them to justify this choice as a common or rational one among other Dominican youth. This could potentially affect the objectivity of the data interpretation.

Finally, there is the bias of the private education lens. As a product of a private school, the researcher might have inherent biases towards the perceived benefits and influences of private education on decisions to study abroad.

The researcher used several strategies to mitigate these potential biases: a reflexive journal, peer debriefing, and member checking. Reflexive journaling involves researchers documenting their thoughts, feelings, and reflections throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This practice helped the researcher remain aware of their biases and their potential impact on data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Peer debriefing entails engagement with colleagues not involved in the study, providing an external check on the research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The researcher interacted with peers from diverse perspectives at the university, which allowed her to receive critical feedback and challenge any biases and assumptions. Lastly, the researcher validated the credibility of the results by employing member checking, where findings were shared with participants to ensure their perspectives were accurately depicted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher shared the preliminary findings with five study participants and asked for their feedback to ensure the analysis was not overly influenced by her position.

More details about the ethical considerations can be found in the privacy notice and the consent form, which are located in Appendices 2 and 3.

### **3.3 Sample and Context of the Study**

This study designates the term "Dominican youth" to represent its target population. According to the United Nations (n.d.), 'youth' refers to "those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years" (para. 1). However, in the Dominican Republic, the General Youth Law 49-2000 defines 'youth' as "people whose ages fall within the age group of 15 to 35 years" (Ministry of Youth & United Nations Population Fund,



2020, p. 24). Hence, the participants of this study fall within these age ranges. Since some of them were not actively studying during the interview period, they are not labelled as 'Dominican students'. To encompass all participants, the term 'Dominican youth' was used.

This study focused on two accessible populations: high school students from a private school in the Dominican Republic planning to study abroad, and master's students from the Dominican Republic who are currently studying abroad or have done so in the past. To select the interviewees, purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods were used, resulting in a total of eleven participants.

The high school student sample was selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling refers to the deliberate selection of participants who possess certain attributes or have undergone particular experiences that are relevant to the research questions (Sago, n.d.). Given the specific nature of this sample, purposive sampling was chosen, as a random selection might not have been suitable or answered the research questions.

The high school students were chosen based on their plans to study abroad. The researcher contacted a private school in the Dominican Republic known for having many graduates who choose to study abroad. The senior class consisted of 21 students, 18 of whom were planning to study abroad. Initially, the researcher obtained the consent of all students who planned to study abroad for interviews. However, most withdrew from the study, leaving only three who completed interviews. Due to technical issues, one interview was unusable. Ultimately, the researcher was able to interview only two high school students.

The selected international school for this study, as stated on their website, is accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). This accreditation ensures that the school adheres to international policies that lead students to higher education abroad. The school follows both a Dominican and American curriculum. The Language Arts and Math classes follow the Common Core State Standards curriculum, while Science classes adhere to the Next Generation Science Standards curriculum.

In this case, it can be concluded that not only do teaching practices channel students into higher education abroad, but the curriculum also plays a crucial role. In most private international schools in the Dominican Republic, the curriculum is designed to produce individuals that meet the expectations of

universities abroad. This particular school's philosophy emphasizes their commitment to providing a challenging education and equipping students with the skills necessary for integration into a multicultural global society.

The high school students in this study were selected from a school located in a town in the Dominican Republic. It is important to note that this town, unlike the capital city, does not have local universities. Therefore, if the students from this school decide to pursue higher education in the Dominican Republic, they would need to relocate to the capital. This would involve finding accommodation (without any state subsidies, as is the case in Finland), acquiring a vehicle for transportation due to unreliable public transportation, and covering tuition fees and living expenses.

The sample of master's students from the Dominican Republic studying abroad or having done so in the past was selected using snowball sampling. Nikolopoulou (2023), explains that this method involves participants referring other potential participants to the researcher, creating a "Snowball effect" until the desired sample size is reached. Also known as chain sampling or network sampling, snowball sampling is a convenient method used when populations are geographically scattered (Nikolopoulou, 2023). Such scattering was the situation for this research since participants were situated in various geographical locations outside of Finland. After the initial interviews, the researcher asked the participants whether they knew anyone who was currently studying abroad or had done so in the past. The participants recommended friends, family, and colleagues who fit the profile the researcher was seeking.

Three subgroups were identified within this population of master's students: (1) Dominican students currently studying abroad, (2) Dominicans who studied abroad and returned to the Dominican Republic, and (3) Dominicans who studied and remained abroad. Four interviews were conducted from the first group, one from the second group, and four from the third group.

Due to the utilisation of snowball sampling to select the master's students, the researcher was unable to control the variables and circumstances of the participants. Because of this, there was only one participant from the subgroup of Dominican students who had studied abroad and returned to the Dominican Republic. Despite being a small sample size, their contribution was significant as it provided a unique perspective and detailed reasons as to why individuals might opt to return to the Dominican Republic after studying abroad.

### 3.4 Data Collection

The research data was collected using semi-structured interviews, which are a combination of structured and unstructured interviews. In this method, the interviewer follows a set of predetermined questions, but the phrasing and sequence of these questions can vary (George, 2022). This approach was selected due to the exploratory nature of this research, which examines the link between brain drain, the decision of Dominican youth to study abroad, and their private educational background. The semi-structured interview technique allows the researcher to explore the participants' unique experiences, focusing on their private education, and comprehend how these experiences shape their views and decision to study abroad.

The interview questions consisted of one background question and nine additional questions divided into four main categories: motivations and plans for studying abroad, application process, family and friends' reactions, and post-study plans. Follow-up and clarifying questions were formulated during the interviews to delve deeper into the participants' experiences and opinions about their past, current, or future studies abroad. The complete set of interview questions is provided in Appendix 1.

Due to considerations of convenience and time efficiency, the interviews were conducted in English. Despite English not being the native language for either the interviewees or the interviewer, all participants agreed they were comfortable expressing themselves in English. The option to conduct the interview in their native language, Spanish, was offered, yet all interviewees preferred English. Occasionally, interviewees communicated certain concepts in Spanish, in which case the interviewer assisted in finding appropriate English equivalents or translations.

The interviews were conducted online due to the geographical distance between the participants and the researcher. The researcher is based in Finland, while the participants are globally distributed. The high school students and the master's student, who returned after studying abroad, were in the Dominican Republic at the time of the interviews. The master's students who are studying and living abroad were in various geographical locations. Tables 1 and 2 provide details about the participants and interviews. This includes whether the participants attended private international or regular Dominican schools, their locations, the total number of transcript pages, and the duration of the interviews.

Table 1 Participants information

Samples	Participants	Attended private international school	Attended private regular Dominican school	Location of the participant
High school students planning to study abroad	HSS1	✓		Dominican Republic
	HSS2	✓		Dominican Republic
Master's students currently studying abroad	MSA1		✓	Germany
	MSA2		✓	Germany
	MSA3		✓	Germany
	MSA4		✓	Spain
Master's students who studied and stayed living abroad	MSL1	✓		United States
	MSL2		✓	Spain
	MSL3		✓	Spain
	MSL4		✓	Spain
Master's student who studied abroad and returned to DR	MSR		✓	Dominican Republic

Table 2 Interviews information

Participants	Transcript pages	Interview time
HSS1	6	17m 50s
HSS2	10	38m 06s
MSA1	8	39m 50s
MSA2	8	31m 40s
MSA3	6	18m 55s
MSA4	9	39m 04s
MSL1	4	14m 35s
MSL2	4	12m 07s
MSL3	5	14m 03s
MSL4	6	25m 33s
MSR	11	37m 07s
Total	77 pages	4h 48m 50s

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. As defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 6). This method was chosen to identify the factors influencing Dominican youth's decisions to study and stay abroad. By analyzing these factors, recurring patterns in the participants' responses were identified. Thematic analysis provides flexibility due to its independence from any particular theoretical framework. Since this study uses both the push-pull factors model and the migrant network theory, thematic analysis enables the researcher to apply both theories. This approach will help determine the primary reasons for Dominican youth to study and stay abroad, and explore the relationship between their private education background and the phenomenon of brain drain in the Dominican Republic.

The researcher specifically employed reflective thematic analysis. This type of thematic analysis involves a systematic yet flexible approach to coding and theme development, while continuously reflecting on how the researcher's own background, perspectives, and interactions with the data influence the analysis (Braun et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher's background, which was taken into account during the analysis, necessitated such reflection. As mentioned earlier, measures were implemented to prevent potential biases and ensure the validity of the analysis.

After conducting the interviews, they were manually transcribed. The researcher then reread the transcripts multiple times to familiarize themselves with the content and note initial impressions and potential themes.

To generate initial codes, open coding was used. This method, defined as "breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61) in qualitative analysis, involves generating initial codes from the data and systematically organizing them to identify emerging themes and patterns. Significant phrases and segments related to the research questions were highlighted using open coding. These codes were reviewed and refined through a process of axial coding, which involves making connections between different codes and identifying broader themes.

Following the generation of initial codes, patterns were identified and the codes were grouped into sub-themes and broader themes, capturing the patterns across the data. Consequently, a thematic map was created to visualize the relationships between the different codes and themes.

The themes were reviewed to ensure they accurately reflected the data, checking for coherence, consistency, and distinction. The themes were then cross-checked with the raw data to confirm their relevance and completeness. Each theme was defined and given a concise, descriptive name.

In the end, five themes were identified. These themes are described in the following section using a thematic narrative. As Braun & Clarke (2006) explain, a thematic narrative is a structured and detailed presentation of qualitative research findings. It is organized around identified themes or patterns that emerged from the data analysis. Quotes, descriptions, and interpretations were used to create a cohesive and meaningful story that illustrated the key findings. These findings were then related to the existing literature on brain drain, private education, and migration motivations to situate the study within a broader academic context.

## 4 Findings

The reflective thematic analysis revealed five themes, 14 sub-themes, and 175 codes<sup>1</sup>. Figure 2 depicts a thematic map illustrating these themes, sub-themes, and their interrelations. The identified themes are as follows:

- a) *Motivations for studying abroad* - This reveals the push factors driving Dominican youth out of their home country and the pull factors attracting them to the host country.
- b) *How networks influence the decision to study abroad* - This highlights the various social networks that facilitated the application and migration processes.
- c) *Financial support: a determinant factor* - This emphasizes the importance of financial aspects in the decision-making process, given that many participants rely on scholarships and aid to afford their studies abroad.
- d) *Private education as a factor in deciding to study abroad* - This demonstrates the types of assistance received from their schools and universities in the Dominican Republic and how this aid influenced their application process.
- e) *Post-study plans: staying abroad or returning home* - This discusses the plans of participants who wish to stay in their host countries, those who plan to return to the Dominican Republic, and the reasons why some participants choose to remain abroad.

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<sup>1</sup> The complete list of themes, sub-themes and codes is available in Appendix 4

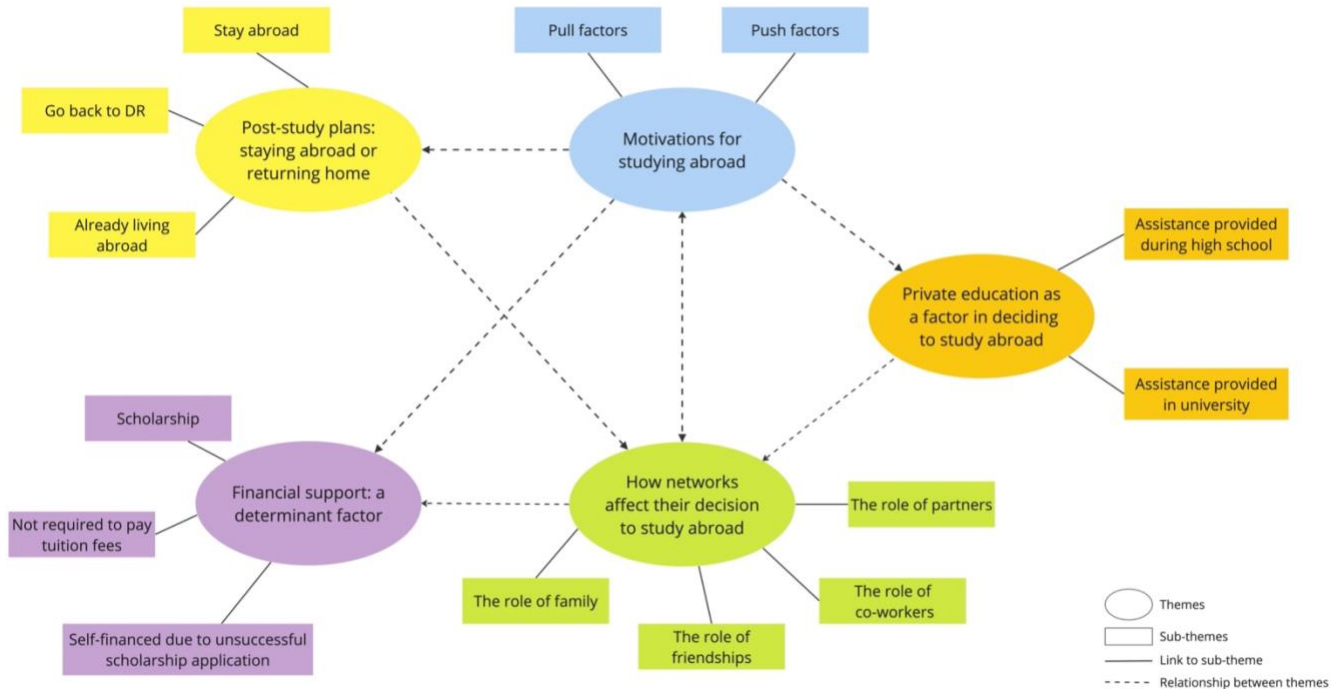


Figure 2 Thematic map with themes and sub-themes

The themes will be further elaborated in the following sections. For validation and credibility of the analysis, excerpts from the participants' responses are included. These excerpts act as supporting evidence for the findings. They are numbered sequentially to improve readability and aid understanding of the analysis. This numerical order allows for a smooth progression of ideas and the ability to reference specific points when necessary.

In the excerpts, each participant is referred to by their pseudonym. High school students planning to study abroad are referred to as HSS 1 and 2. Master's students currently studying abroad are referred to as MSA 1–4. Those who studied and continued living abroad are referred to as MSL 1–4. The master's student who studied abroad and returned to DR is referred to as MSR.

#### 4.1 What are the reasons for Dominican youth to study and stay abroad?

During the interviews, participants shared their motivations for studying abroad. The previously mentioned push-pull factors model was used as the research framework to interpret and categorize these responses. This framework helped identify 18 push and pull factors. The push factors denote the circumstances in the Dominican Republic that prompted them to seek education abroad. Simultaneously,



the pull factors highlight the allure that made them want to immigrate and study abroad. The following sections detail these push and pull factors.

#### 4.1.1 Push and Pull Factors

Out of the 18 factors, eight were identified as push factors. These push factors play a significant role in the decision-making process, as they highlight the reasons why participants feel the need to seek educational opportunities outside of the Dominican Republic. Figure 3 displays these push factors along with the frequency of their responses.

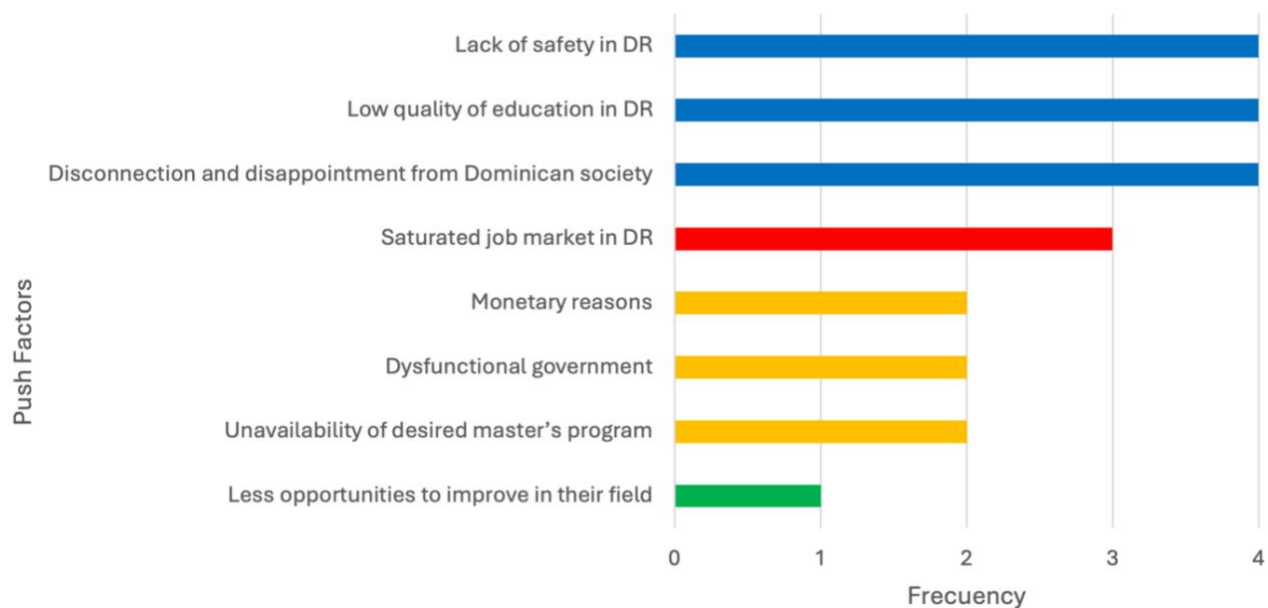


Figure 3 Push factors identified during the interviews

As indicated in Figure 3, the main reasons that drive Dominican youth to pursue an education abroad include a lack of safety in the Dominican Republic, poor quality of education, and a sense of disconnection and disappointment with Dominican society. Those who cited safety as a reason emphasized their feelings of insecurity in the current situation. This feeling of insecurity has therefore become a compelling reason for them to consider studying abroad and seeking a safer environment to continue their education.

It is important to note that the four participants who expressed safety concerns are women. Given the high incidence of violence against women in the Dominican Republic, it is no surprise that this is a

major factor in their desire to study abroad. In 2020, the Dominican Republic reported the second highest rate of femicide in Latin America and the Caribbean, with 2.4 women per 100,000 inhabitants being victims (UNFPA, 2022). In such circumstances, many young women feel unsafe and aspire to immigrate to regions where gender equality is more recognized. As mentioned in excerpt 4, even the participant who returned to the Dominican Republic after her studies stated that her main concern about residing there is safety.

**Excerpt 1.** *“What affects me the most, it's really unsafe country.”* (MSA1)

**Excerpt 2.** *“I hate to drive. And in Dominican Republic, the public transportation is very bad. It's dangerous. Even if you have your own car, you have to always be aware, like not to get robbed.”* (MSA2)

**Excerpt 3.** *“The lack of safety, especially for women, I was just feeling very disappointed leaving DR.”* (MSA4)

**Excerpt 4.** *“My problem is not the money. My problem is not the health because I'm healthy still. Maybe when I'm 40, I'll complain about the health thing. It's safety.”* (MSR)

Another significant factor pushing Dominican youth to study abroad is the low quality of education in the Dominican Republic. The participants expressed dissatisfaction with the public education system, indicating it fails to effectively educate the majority of the population. This, in turn, they feel contributes to a generally uneducated society. Participants also voiced discontent with the culture in higher education. As seen in excerpt 6, they felt that students are treated as children, overlooking their additional responsibilities such as jobs or families. This could represent a lack of respect for students' autonomy and maturity, potentially creating a demotivating learning environment. It also indicates a disconnect between the educational system and the realities of students' lives, which might play a part in the desire to study abroad where educational practices could be more accommodating and respectful of adult responsibilities.

**Excerpt 5.** *“Public education is not good, so in general people are not educated, and since people are not educated and the public system, where 80% of people get their education from, is not good enough....that means that the country is not going to change for a long time, and that people are not thinking of how to improve their situation yet.”* (MSA1)

**Excerpt 6.** *“The culture in DR when it comes to superior education, higher education [...] the teachers treat you like you're still a child. And you don't have any other responsibilities. They treat*

*people like they don't have jobs, like they don't have families. And I was not going to put up with that. That completely demotivated me from doing something in DR.” (MSA4)*

Other major factors driving participants to study abroad were disconnection and disappointment with Dominican society. They expressed feeling detached from the Dominican Republic, with no desire to build a future there. This disconnection influenced their plans from a young age to move abroad. One participant, MSL2, described feeling unable to be herself in the country as she could not relate with its lifestyle. This resonates with HSS2's sentiments about the prevalence of social issues like misogyny and racism in the Dominican Republic, contributing to this sense of disconnection and disappointment.

This suggests that cultural and societal norms in the Dominican Republic may be restrictive, prompting Dominican youth to seek places where they feel accepted and comfortable. In places where these issues are less pronounced, they can be their true selves.

This dissatisfaction is also tied to the country's economic and political condition. As MSA4 mentioned in excerpt 9, low wages and high taxes with no apparent benefits lead to a lack of trust in the local system. This is related to the previously mentioned push factor of low salaries. A combination of this distrust and the desire for better opportunities can prompt the decision to study abroad.

**Excerpt 7.** *“I didn't feel that connected to Dominican Republic, so I've always planned from a young age that I wanted to leave and make my life in another country.” (MSA1)*

**Excerpt 8.** *“I never connected with the lifestyle. I love my country, I love the people there, my family is there [...] but in terms of me personally, I never was my full self and in here [Spain], I can be my full self and I connected a lot with the way of living here [Spain]” (MSL2)*

**Excerpt 9.** *“I was already starting to feel very disappointed in Dominican society, working extremely hard, having to get very low salaries, paying so many taxes and getting absolutely nothing in return.” (MSA4)*

**Excerpt 10.** *“We're still very high on a lot of cultural aspects and things like misogyny, racism are still very active here and I just never envisioned myself living in a space where those kind of social remarks are still being said.” (HSS2)*

The saturated job market in the Dominican Republic is the fourth most common factor pushing Dominican youth abroad. Three participants mentioned it as a reason for their decision to study outside of the Dominican Republic. They described the job market in the Dominican Republic as oversaturated and offering limited opportunities. All the interviewed master's students had prior work experience in

the Dominican Republic, either during their bachelor's studies or afterward. Dissatisfaction with the current job market contributed to their decision to study abroad. Many aimed to immigrate to their study destinations or have already decided to stay. Thus, the current job market situation in the Dominican Republic serves as a driving force for studying abroad.

In relation to this, participants stated that the low salaries in the Dominican Republic were one of the reasons they decided to study abroad. Given that the master's students have work experience, they are familiar with earning money in the Dominican Republic. They expressed concerns that the current economic climate makes the low salaries insufficient for the lifestyle they aspire to have.

**Excerpt 11.** *“The current market in Dominican Republic is saturated and there's not a lot of job offers. It's very traditional too.”* (MSA2)

**Excerpt 12.** *“I did work while I was studying and I had a taste of like earning Dominican money and seeing how salary was good for nothing there.”* (MSL1)

**Excerpt 13.** *“I don't want a minimum wage that it would not let me live the life that I wanted.”* (MSA2)

Other less frequently mentioned push factors included monetary reasons, a dysfunctional government, and the unavailability of desired master's programs locally. Despite being mentioned only twice by the participants, these factors were still relevant reasons for seeking education outside the Dominican Republic.

Regarding the monetary reasons, the participants highlighted that undertaking a master's degree in the Dominican Republic comes with a significant cost. This financial burden was seen as prohibitive by many, leading them to seek alternative means to fund their education. One popular avenue that emerged was scholarships, specifically those provided by the Dominican government. These scholarships allowed the participants to pursue their academic goals without being burdened by the financial stress. The necessity of these scholarships underscores the importance of financial support in the decision-making process of these students. This aspect, being a significant push factor, will be further explore in the theme of financial support.

**Excerpt 14.** *“I never thought of doing it in the Dominican Republic, especially because they are very expensive there and this was an opportunity that is completely paid by the government.”* (MS3)

Another significant push factor mentioned during the interviews was the dysfunctional government in the Dominican Republic. Participants described the deteriorating environment each year and the impact of insufficient social benefits on their lifestyles. This issue served as one of the reasons they chose to pursue their education abroad. This situation is linked to the low salaries, as the combination of lacking social benefits and the government's inability to provide these services makes the living conditions unattractive for young adults seeking to establish themselves.

**Excerpt 15.** *“The government is dysfunctional, the environment is very, it's getting worse each year.”* (MSA1)

**Excerpt 16.** *“You always have to be worried that you are going to pay the health insurance. You have to pay, I don't know, taxes, the lights, the energy. And that if you don't have a good job, no one is going to help you. If you don't have insurance, no one is going to help you.”* (MSA2)

Out of the 18 factors identified, 10 were classified as pull factors. These pull factors represent the reasons that attracted the participants to pursue their studies in foreign countries. Figure 4 displays these pull factors along with the frequency of their occurrence.

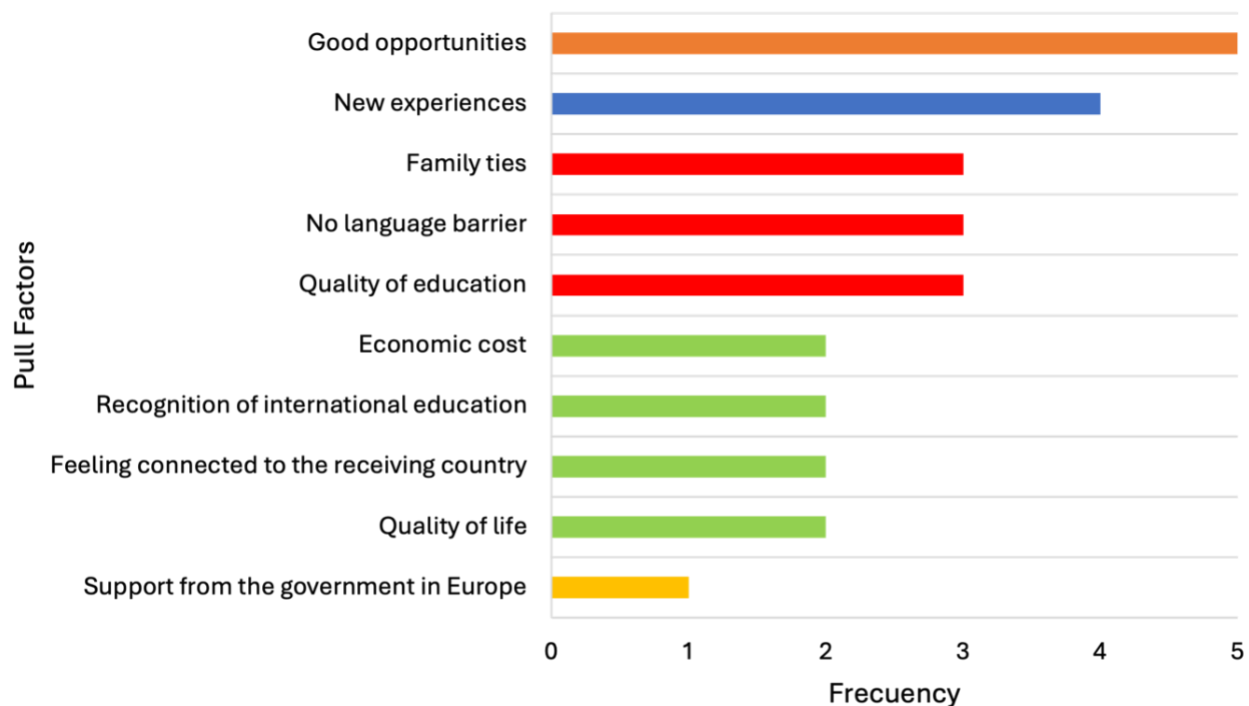


Figure 4 Pull factors identified during the interviews

As indicated in Figure 4, the primary reason Dominican youth choose to study abroad is the prospect of good opportunities. When they refer to "good opportunities", the participants refer to a secure lifestyle, improved job prospects, the chance to broaden their knowledge base, and the ability to build their profiles and advance in their chosen careers. They hold the belief that these goals may be less attainable within the Dominican Republic. Therefore, the prospect of studying abroad presents itself as a promising avenue that could potentially amplify their chances and provide a wider array of opportunities.

**Excerpt 17.** *"I prefer to study abroad because there are more opportunity to get knowledge here"* (MSL3)

**Excerpt 18.** *"because I might get a lot of opportunities that I'm not able to get in my home country, better job salaries, better like security lifestyle"* (MSA2)

**Excerpt 19.** *"The opportunity to be in probably the best company of the sub-specialty [...] we do research and the publications that appear in, like we are the innovators of the world."* (MSL4)

**Excerpt 20.** *"I wanted to build like a profile and a career that was much more respected and that will get me much more profit in the future in Dominican Republic"* (MSA1)

Following good opportunities, the second most common pull factor was new experiences, mentioned by four participants. By "new experience," they refer to encountering different cultures, living as a foreign student, traveling to new places, and living independently. The appeal of experiences abroad is especially compelling for individuals in their early twenties, who often favor having these experiences in the earlier stages of their lives. This desire reflects that participants value personal growth and cultural awareness. They see studying abroad as a chance to broaden their horizons and gain a more global perspective.

**Excerpt 21.** *"Why did I decide it? First, because I wanted to live the experience of living abroad as a student."* (MSA2)

**Excerpt 22.** *"My first push to come abroad to study was just like living the experience of being a foreigner student."* (MSA3)

**Excerpt 23.** *"I really wanted the travel experience. I wanted to get to know other places because I knew that after I started my whole process with working and everything back home, I wouldn't be able to take time to do this or I wouldn't be able to take the money to do this."* (MSA3)

After new experiences, the next reasons Dominican youth chose to study abroad were family ties and no language barrier. Three participants specifically cited the presence of family members residing in their chosen host countries as a significant influence in their decision-making process. This factor, in

particular, aligns with the network-mediated migration theory, previously mentioned in this study. According to this theoretical framework, the presence of an established social network in a potential host country simplifies the migration process, thereby making such countries more appealing (Y.-J. Lee et al., 2017). It provides a support system that aids in the integration process, making the transition smoother and less daunting. As highlighted in excerpts 24 and 25, having an established network in the receiving country not only simplifies the decision-making process but also other aspects such as locating suitable housing.

**Excerpt 24.** *“I have family in New York which was a big motivator for me to come specifically to New York.”* (MSL4)

**Excerpt 25.** *“Family is a huge factor because I don't have to worry about a place to stay because I could stay with my grandma while we have a house over there.”* (HSS1)

Spain is often seen as a popular study abroad destination for many students in the Dominican Republic, primarily due to the absence of a language barrier. Looking at the participants responses, this claim is further substantiated. Out of the 11 participants, almost half, that is 5 of them, have chosen Spain as their preferred study destination. The common language, Spanish, that is shared by both Spain and the Dominican Republic, acts as a significant motivator for these students to study abroad. Studying in a foreign country involves not only academics but also creating comfort in unfamiliar surroundings, which can be facilitated by a shared language.

Additionally, English was another language that facilitated the study abroad process and acted as a motivator for many participants. Being bilingual was a significant advantage for the participants, especially those who chose to complete their studies in English-speaking countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom, or those in international programs where the language of instruction is English. This was also the case for participants who chose to study in Germany.

**Excerpt 26.** *“She [therapist] said it would be a challenge, but not such a big challenge because of the language.”* (MSL2)

**Excerpt 27.** *“Initially, I was thinking of doing it in Germany, and I did like a three month course of German. And at the fourth month, I realized that it was easier for me to study more medicine and do the exam that they do here in Spain than learning German.”* (MSL4)

**Excerpt 28.** *“The U.S. just felt like an opportunity to experience entrepreneurship which I really wanted to do and a new culture that's also not too harsh on me to the point where it affects my academics because I speak the language.”* (HSS2)

The perceived higher quality of foreign education is another significant factor motivating Dominican youth to study abroad. When comparing their experiences at foreign universities to Dominican institutions, participants highlighted better access to information and resources abroad, as indicated in excerpts 29 and 30. They also critiqued the teaching approach in the Dominican Republic's higher institutions, stating that students are taught only to execute tasks, rather than learning how to learn. This is a skill they believe is better nurtured in foreign universities. Additionally, participants expressed that foreign universities offer a broader range of courses and more opportunities for hands-on, practical learning experiences. These factors create a more enriching educational environment. Such an environment encourages students to develop critical thinking skills and fosters lifelong learning, making it a more attractive offer for students to seek an education from abroad.

**Excerpt 29.** *“The knowledge that I, that I get here is very, very good. It's different. [...] the teachers in the university and the quality of the university. We have more instrument here to teach students.”* (MSL3)

**Excerpt 30.** *“There was so much more resources. Education life, it was very enriching. You have so much more access to information [...] in the Dominican's education system, where in uni you're taught to execute, but you're not taught to learn. You're not taught to investigate.”* (MSR)

Several less influential factors also impacted the participants' decisions to study abroad. These include economic cost, recognition of an international education, a sense of connection to the host country, and quality of life. Each of these factors was mentioned twice, highlighting that while they might not be the primary influence, personal motivations significantly shape the decision to study abroad. It is imperative to avoid generalizations as everyone has unique personal reasons that may greatly differ from others.

Economic cost was highlighted by HSS1 and MSA4. For HSS1, a high school student who chose to study in Spain, the absence of tuition fees due to his Spanish citizenship swayed his decision over a private Dominican university, where he would have to pay. In contrast, MSA4 weighed up the costs of studying in the Dominican Republic against taking a student loan. As stated in excerpt 31, she does not find a significant difference in prices between the two countries. Therefore, she thinks that opting for a student loan may not be the best decision for her future. In this context, economic cost serves as both a pull and push factor. Many participants weigh their options; the absence of tuition fees and the opportunity to



earn a scholarship attract them to study abroad, while the high cost of studying in the Dominican Republic motivates them to leave the country.

**Excerpt 31.** *“If I’m going to have to pay for that, I’m going to have to also take out a loan. I’m going to have to pay that, the loan, the interest. And the prices in Spain aren’t really that different to do a master’s.”* (MSA4)

It is noteworthy that the two participants who mentioned the recognition of an international education also associated it with better opportunities, a previously stated pull factor. As seen in excerpts 32 and 33, they believe that this international education could lead to better salaries and job prospects, as well as career advancement, either in their host country or if they decided to return to the Dominican Republic. This suggests that the perceived value of an international education extends beyond academic learning, encompassing broader career and life benefits.

**Excerpt 32.** *“If I decide to go back to DR, as I mentioned, it will be not easier to get a job, but it will be seen as a very positive, fancy thing that I studied in another country [...] employers are definitely going to see my studying abroad as a positive thing and as me having more knowledge because I studied in Europe”* (MSA1)

**Excerpt 33.** *“Like everyone wanted to do it abroad because you would get paid a lot more. It had a lot more weight. Once you come back to DR, if you go back to DR.”* (MSA4)

Feeling connected to the receiving country was another significant, though less frequently mentioned, pull factor. This connection to their host country, stood in stark contrast to the push factor of a growing sense of disconnection and disappointment with their native Dominican society. Participant MSL2, for instance, mentioned feeling a dual sense of attachment: she felt strongly connected to her host country and, at the same time, experienced a profound sense of disconnection from the Dominican Republic. This combination of feelings was a significant factor in her decision to stay in her new home country.

Interestingly, both participants who expressed feeling a strong connection to their receiving country ended up making a permanent move, choosing to stay there without returning to the Dominican Republic. It became evident that this emotional connection to the new country was a powerful driving force in their decision to stay, as seen in excerpts 34 and 35. This suggests an emotional aspect to the brain drain phenomenon, indicating that the decision to emigrate is not based solely on economic or educational factors, but also on how well the individuals feel they fit into and connect with their new environment.

**Excerpt 34.** *“I’ve been in love with New York since I was a child.”* (MSL1)

Pull factor

**Excerpt 35.** *“I had already been here for vacation and I always connected with the city. [...] As I expected, I connected a lot with the country and the lifestyle here.”* (MSL2)

Push factor

**Excerpt 36.** *“I never connected with the lifestyle. I love my country, I love the people there, my family is there [...] but in terms of me personally, I never was my full self.”* (MSL2)

#### 4.1.2 How networks affected their decision to study abroad

The second theme addresses the role of various social networks in influencing the participants' decisions to study abroad, aligning with the previously stated network mediated migration theory. As defined, this theory describes these migrant networks as connections linking family, relatives, friends, and community members from both home and host locations (Y. Lee et al., 2017). These networks serve as a vital source of support, influencing and facilitating the decision to study abroad.

Four migrant networks were identified in the analysis: family, friendships, co-workers, and romantic partnerships. Each network influences the decision to study abroad, though the level of influence varies; some networks exert a greater role than others. However, each one is crucial to the migration process, playing a unique role that cannot be replaced by others.

The responses indicated that family played a significant role in the participants' decision to study abroad and throughout the application process. This aligns with the network-mediated migration theory (Lee et al., 2017; Portes, 1995), with family acting as a social network that assisted the migration process. The participants received various forms of support from their families, including emotional encouragement, financial support, and in some cases, the presence of family members in the host country, which influenced their choice of destination.

Most participants reported that their families were supportive of their decision to study abroad. Many families were not only happy but also encouraged their members to pursue education overseas. Some even viewed studying abroad as a normal step in their career progression due to their travel experiences. This familial approval greatly facilitated the migration process, as the emotional support provided by the family significantly influenced the participants' decision to study abroad.

**Excerpt 37.** *“My mom was very supportive throughout all the process [...] The rest of my family has traveled a lot, and a lot of them have studied in other countries, so they saw it as a normal thing, like a normal step.”* (MSA1)

**Excerpt 38.** *“My family was very happy because my mother has always been a great supporter of mine [...] All my family agreed to and they support me till today.”* (MSA2)

**Excerpt 39.** *“They were very supportive, in general. They thought it was a great opportunity for me to learn new things, to grow, to make friends.”* (MSR)

Having family in the destination country significantly influenced some participants' decisions to study abroad. Relatives can provide considerable assistance, helping newcomers navigate the challenges of a new environment, such as securing housing or offering emotional support. As noted by HSS1 and MSL1, having family in the country was the primary reason they chose their respective study locations. Even for those who did not consider this a significant motivator, it is still beneficial to know someone in the country in case assistance is needed.

**Excerpt 40.** *“Family is a huge factor because I don't have to worry about a place to stay because I could stay with my grandma while we have a house over there.”* (HSS1)

**Excerpt 41.** *“I have family in New York which was a big motivator for me to come specifically to New York.”* (MSL1)

Friendships also played an important role for the participants during their decision and application process. Unlike family, the reactions from friends varied. Participants reported receiving positive, negative, and mixed responses.

The positive support and encouragement from friends, as reported by participants MSA4 and MSL3, likely helped to solidify the participants' decisions. This support not only reinforced their choices but also provided a strong emotional backing, acting as a safety net during this experience. On the other hand, negative reactions from friends, like those experienced by participant MSA2, provided a different perspective. These reactions allowed the participants to reevaluate their relationships and assess the strength of their bonds, which in turn could have strengthened their resolve to pursue their dreams and ambitions. As demonstrated in excerpt 42, this reaction could have intensified MSA2's sense of disconnection from her country. Mixed reactions, as described by participants MSA1 and MSL1, might have added a layer of uncertainty to the decision-making process, but these reactions also highlighted the complex emotions and considerations involved in such a life-altering decision. The varying reactions that the participants received from their friends served as a reflection of the multifaceted nature of the decision to study abroad, demonstrating the wide array of factors that can influence such a significant choice.

**Excerpt 42.** *“Some of them like they face a little bit of rejection, like what are you going to do? Are you going to leave us? Where are you going to come? And start asking these questions that I even myself knew the answer to [...] I started to see who is my real friend or who care about me in that way because it was always been a dream.”* (MSA2)

Having friends who were already studying or living abroad acted as a significant pull factor for the participants to decide to study abroad. Many participants stated having friends who were already studying or living abroad. Many stated that their most of their close friends were already living abroad, which could have acted as a source of not only motivation but also provided a sense of comfort and security, as seeing other people navigate the process of studying abroad could have made the idea seem more attainable and less daunting. Hearing about their friends' experiences could have heightened the appeal of studying abroad, reinforcing the potential benefits and opportunities that come with it.

**Excerpt 43.** *“I have a group of five close friends, and most of, two of them are studying abroad. And their intention of studying abroad was always very clear.”* (MSA1)

**Excerpt 44.** *“My friends, were all like in different countries [...] like from my closest group of friends, like probably less than 20% are still in Dominican Republic [...] like our generation and like everyone that can study abroad, studies abroad.”* (MSL4)

The participants found it beneficial to have friends who had already lived abroad or had a similar experience, especially during the application process. They mentioned being in contact with these friends, seeking their insights and suggestions, and getting guidance throughout the application process. They highlighted how these connections were a significant help, echoing the concept of the migrant network theory. Interestingly, this network provided a unique kind of support that their family, for instance, could not offer.

**Excerpt 45.** *“I was in constant contact with one of my friends that is in Europe, and we shared experiences and what was going on, because she left before I did.”* (MSA1)

**Excerpt 46.** *“I had a friend that she had come in the previous year. She went to Spain as well through the same program. So, she helped me a lot there.”* (MSA3)

**Excerpt 47.** *“The person who really supported me was the friend who did the Chevening Scholarship, because the Chevening Scholarship process, application process is so much longer and tedious, and she helped me in every step.”* (MSR)

Participants indicated that aside from their family and circle of friends, there were other networks of people in their lives that played a role in influencing their decision to pursue studies abroad. One such

network, which might not initially come to mind as influential, is their professional environment; specifically, their co-workers.

In any professional setting, individuals spend a substantial portion of their day at work. As a result, they often form deep and close-knit relationships with their co-workers. These relationships can inadvertently influence their life choices, including educational pursuits such as studying abroad. For instance, as seen in excerpt 48, MSR was motivated to apply by her boss, who had attended the same university she was applying to. This connection, in many ways, acted as a strong pull factor. It drew MSR towards the destination country, primarily because someone from her immediate professional network had not only shared the same academic experience but also lived in the same location. This provided MSR with a sense of familiarity and comfort, further propelling her decision to study abroad.

**Excerpt 48.** *“I had a boss that she had done, she had gone to the same uni I did [...] I was motivated by them in a sense, like, when I saw them, and I saw that they could do it, how they apply, like, that motivated me tons”* (MSR)

Conversely, co-workers can also serve as a deterrent. As MSA4 stated in excerpt 49, she had considered pursuing a master's degree in the Dominican Republic. However, observing her co-workers' struggles to balance their studies and work dissuaded her from doing so. This indirectly influenced her decision and further motivated her to study abroad, as she was unwilling to endure similar experiences.

**Excerpt 49.** *“I had contemplated doing a master's in DR. But what I saw from my teammates at work, I saw the amount of pressure that they had while doing a master's and working at the same time.”* (MSA4)

The final network identified during the analysis was romantic partnerships. For many people, having a partner in the destination country can be a major motivator in choosing to move there. This was the case for MSA4, who decided to study in Spain not only for the academic opportunities, but mainly because her partner was already living there. This influenced her to focus her search on universities in the city where he resided. Besides the financial benefits, such as saving on rent, she also highlighted the significant emotional support he provided. She emphasized the importance of this support during the immigration process. This is another example of how social networks can facilitate the immigration process and further motivate Dominican youth to leave their country.

**Excerpt 50.** *“Also the personal life aspect of being able to live with my boyfriend and not only live with my boyfriend, but actually have his support that has been extremely important. I cannot*

*explain how important that has been.[...] it's not just from the financial side, it's also like the emotional side, because immigrating is not easy at all. And at least living with someone that supports you, that makes a lot of difference” (MSA4)*

#### 4.1.3 Financial support: a determinant factor

The third theme identified is financial support and how it can determine whether or not someone is able to study abroad. Although family financial support was mentioned previously, it is crucial to acknowledge this theme separately. Today, the reach of organised national scholarship programs greatly influences the dynamics of student mobility (Institute of International Education, 2017). Many participants were able to study abroad primarily due to scholarships. Out of 11 participants, eight had scholarships. Five out of these eight received scholarships from the Dominican government, and the rest from the university (or, as is the case for one of the high school students, were planning to apply). Two participants did not need scholarships as they were exempt from tuition fees, and only one participant self-financed her education after an unsuccessful scholarship application to the Dominican government.

Every year, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology (MESCYT for its Spanish acronym) opens its call for international scholarships. In 2024, scholarships were awarded from 59 universities in 15 countries, offering around 549 programs (Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, 2024).

The participants who received these scholarships reported a difficult and strenuous application process due to late responses, lack of organization, unclear selection criteria, and bureaucracy. These complications prevented many participants from starting their studies on time and arriving in their destination country. As stated by MSA2 and MSA3 in excerpts 51 and 52, this was the most stressful part of the entire application process due to the Dominican government's inability to offer a smooth and organized process.

**Excerpt 51.** *“The government process was quite the most stressful part because they are not very organized. So the process was not efficient and there were like a lot of late answers and like moments that we didn't know what was going to be of us.” (MSA2)*

**Excerpt 52.** *“We don't know what were the criteria to choose like how they picked us.[...] So I was supposed to come here in October 2022 and then we were supposed to come here in February 2023 and then something personal happened and I have to come here in October 2023. So I spent a whole year delaying it.” (MSA3)*

Additionally, this program has faced criticism from Dominican society for being highly elitist. It is often stated that without insider connections to speed up the process, it is nearly impossible to obtain a scholarship. MSA4, shared this sentiment. She stated that despite having a strong profile, she was unable to secure the scholarship due to a lack of insider connections.

**Excerpt 53.** *“I did apply for a scholarship with MESCOYT. And after, I saw that I didn't get it[.]I had everything. And I didn't get it. And I know people that did not graduate with my grades that have gotten scholarships. And I was like, what the hell? Like, how does that work? And I was like, oh, no, you actually have to know someone that works there.”* (MSA4)

Moreover, the scholarship program has also faced criticism due to the significant financial investment required from the recipients. The program does not cover visa application fees, flight tickets, and there have been instances of delayed payments during the initial months of studies. As a result, recipients must rely on their savings or financial assistance from family to sustain themselves. Many participants mentioned they received financial support from their families to cover costs. As De Oleo (2023) stated, “these international scholarships, although they are a valuable opportunity, are not really for the poor, nor for people who are not capable of making a suffocating economic sacrifice to take advantage of them and go to another country to prepare, to get an education.” (para. 3)

For these reasons, the ability to afford studies abroad significantly impacts a person's opportunity to study abroad. Despite receiving scholarships, many participants still heavily relied on financial support from their families and personal savings from prior employment. This helped them cover their study costs and living expenses. Furthermore, despite the considerable obstacles and numerous challenges they encountered during the scholarship application process, including various postponements, they remained undeterred in their pursuit of international education. This perseverance reveals that the adversities they encounter were insufficient to suppress their aspirations to study overseas. It demonstrates that the allure of an international education and the prospective advantages it offers, were sufficiently compelling to outweigh the difficulties they endured during the application process.

#### 4.1.4 Post-study plans: staying abroad or returning home

For numerous individuals, the pursuit of education in a foreign country frequently serves as the initial phase in the process of long-term migration to another nation (Crossman and Clarke, 2009; Wintre et al., 2015 as cited in OECD, 2023a). Most participants expressed a desire to stay abroad after their studies,

with five out of 11 stating they wished to remain abroad rather than return to the Dominican Republic. Four participants were already living abroad and shared their reasons for opting not to return to their home country. Only two participants expressed a desire to return to the Dominican Republic, with one already having returned. This data underscores the ongoing phenomenon of brain drain and the reasons behind it. The following sections describe these three groups, their motivations for their respective decisions, and how these relate to the brain drain phenomenon in the Dominican Republic.

When asked about their plans after they finish their studies, both the high school students and most of the master's students said they were planning on staying abroad. Out of the four master students who are currently studying abroad, only one stated they wish to come back and the rest expressed their wishes to stay abroad, either in the country where they currently were studying or in other countries, but they were very adamant about their wishes to not come back to the Dominican Republic. As stated by MSA4, the current political, economic and social situation in the country pushes young people away and there is little hope for things to improve. This is a clear example of the consequences of brain drain, since many of these people have no wish to come back to their home country after they finish their studies.

**Excerpt 68.** *“I definitely will not live in Dominican Republic probably also not in Spain”* (HSS2)

**Excerpt 69.** *“I will either find a way of staying in the country, or going back for two years, according to what I need to do with my contract, and then come back [...] I wouldn't like to build a family, which is my goal, in a country like the Dominican Republic.”* (MSA1)

**Excerpt 70.** *“There's very little hope for things to actually get better. For all of the young professionals that are leaving abroad to actually want to go back. Yeah. It's gonna be very hard”.* (MSA4)

Additionally, many professionals who receive scholarships from MESCYT stay abroad instead of returning to the Dominican Republic. Clara Benedicto, the Director of Cooperation and International Relations at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo (UASD), stated, "It is happening that many of those professional human resources are staying in Europe, and they are staying in the United States" (Moreno, 2016, para. 18). This is the case for two participants, MSA1 and MSA2, who currently hold MESCYT scholarships. They expressed their desires to remain abroad, despite being contractually obliged to return to the Dominican Republic. Even if they were forced to return, they maintain that they would eventually want to leave the country and reside abroad.



**Excerpt 71.** *“If I needed to go back those two years, it would be very frustrating and disappointing. But I will use those two years to plan and to save on how to leave the country again.”* (MSA1)

This clearly highlights the significant impact of the brain drain phenomenon. If individuals are still seeking ways to leave after returning to their home country, it indicates that the negative consequences of brain drain affect a country. This can lead to a lack of skilled professionals in key sectors, hampering economic growth and development, and exacerbating social inequalities.

Moreover, the cultural mindset of leaving the country significantly contributes to the brain drain increase in the Dominican Republic. As HSS2 expresses in excerpt 72, the primary goal in the country is to live abroad. Interestingly, he essentially defines the concept of brain drain, as he articulates that professionals who leave the Dominican Republic are undermining the country's development as they take with them the intellectual property who could help improve the domestic situation. This issue highlights the underlying root problem of brain drain. Therefore, addressing this cultural mindset and fostering an environment that encourages these professionals to apply their skills within the country is a critical step towards mitigating the negative impacts of brain drain.

**Excerpt 72.** *“I feel like Dominicans have this idea I need to get out the country that's like the first thing that they want to do and that's the goal get out of the Dominican Republic and once they do, they never look back [...] that's the reason why we're the same place where we've been for years because the people that have the intellectual property, the people that have grown and gotten bigger experience in the world, once they graduate they never look back ”* (HSS2)

Among the master's students currently studying abroad, only MSA3 expressed the desire to return to the Dominican Republic. Her experience differs significantly from the other participants due to negative experiences encountered during her studies:

**Excerpt 73.** *“I am going to be bluntly honest with you, I hate it. I don't like it at all. I feel very alone, I haven't been able to meet that many people. I haven't been able to make that many friends [...] I don't like the experience because it's very overwhelming.”* (MSA3)

This negative experience amplified her intention to return to the Dominican Republic once she finishes her academic endeavours. The primary factors influencing this decision are her familial ties, the profound connections she has with her friends, and an inextricable bond to her home country. Furthermore, she specifically mentioned the comfort of being in a place where there are no language barriers to overcome. She can communicate freely and effortlessly, a contrast to her experience in Germany where she would need to learn a new language to integrate into society. As she is keenly focused on progressing in her

career, she firmly believes that the opportunities for advancement in the Dominican Republic are considerably more promising compared to those available in Europe.

**Excerpt 74.** *I realized that I cannot stay here when I'm so far from my people [...] I want to go back home because it's home, you know? It's where I have everything. I already know how to handle everything there. (MSA3)*

**Excerpt 75.** *"I feel like here in Europe, everything is very fair. after you reach a certain point in your career, you're going to stay there for a long while. And I don't like that. I like to always be challenged. I like to grow.... I like to challenge myself. So, I don't think I can do that here (Europe)."* (MSR3)

In MSR's case, she had different reasons for returning to the Dominican Republic. She considered staying abroad and was conflicted about the decision. However, due to her contractual obligations, she did not want to risk staying in the United Kingdom. However, her primary reason for returning was a stable relationship she had in the Dominican Republic.

**Excerpt 76.** *"If I had won the Fulbright Scholarship or the Chevening Scholarship, they mandate you to be two years in the country. So, I never thought of staying. With MESCYT, it's supposedly the same, but you know that no one, like, no one enforces that law."* (MSR)

**Excerpt 77.** *"I had a very stable relationship with my boyfriend, who was my previous best friend, and we're engaged now".* (MSR)

MSR also shared her experiences facing judgment from fellow Dominicans who had chosen to stay abroad. This criticism was articulated even before she returned to the Dominican Republic. This encounter highlights the entrenched nature of the concept of brain drain within the Dominican culture. It seems to be so deeply rooted that individuals who choose to return to the country face backlash. They are often met with disapproval and actively encouraged to continue their lives abroad, rather than returning to contribute to their home country. This perspective further exacerbates the brain drain issue as it discourages those considering a return, perpetuating the cycle of intellectual and professional loss for the Dominican Republic.

**Excerpt 78.** *"Every time I ran into Dominicans who had stayed in the UK from the scholarship in previous years, and they asked me, well, so what are your plans? And I'm like, oh, I'm going to do that [return to DR]. What are you going to do in DR? Where are you going? Like, as if I'm stupid."* (MSR)

Four of the participants, had already established their lives abroad. They had completed their master's degrees in their respective fields in their current country of residence. After that, they decided to stay instead of returning to the Dominican Republic.

The reasons they gave for this decision were varied and personal, but there were a few common themes that emerged. One of the most significant factors was employment opportunities. The participants MSL3 and MSL4 had managed to secure jobs in their host countries, providing them with a solid reason to stay.

In addition to employment, these participants also highlighted the superior quality of life and education in their host countries as reasons for their decision to stay. They appreciated the lifestyle, the educational system, and the opportunities for personal and professional growth that these countries offered.

**Excerpt 79.** *“Because I get a job and I love the quality of life here, the education, the difference of the culture.”* (MSL3)

**Excerpt 80.** *“The salary is very good and for my specialty, for my sub-specialty, um, is great. [...] Here we live like an easy life.”* (MSL4)

Furthermore, their feelings and emotional connections played a role in their decision to stay. As mentioned previously, feeling connected to the receiving country and feeling disconnected from the Dominican Republic not only acted as push and pull factors, but also determined whether a person chose to stay abroad or not. The participants MSL1 and MSL2 expressed a profound sense of connection to their host countries, which made the prospect of remaining there more appealing. On the contrary, they also felt a certain disconnect from the Dominican Republic, which acted as a deterrent to returning. MSL1 discusses feeling disconnected from her friends and life in the Dominican Republic during her visits, and how her life changed after permanently moving abroad. For MSL2, the connection she felt with her receiving country and the disconnection from the Dominican Republic were the primary reasons for her decision to stay.

**Excerpt 81.** *“Like I go there and I talk to my friends that are still there and it's strange. It's like they have changed very little and I feel like I can't relate a lot to them anymore.”* (MSL1)

**Excerpt 82.** *“As I expected, I connected a lot with the country and the lifestyle here. [...] In terms of me personally, I never was my full self and in here [Spain], I can be my full self and I connected a lot with the way of living here [Spain]”* (MSL2)

Participants who chose to settle abroad embody a vital aspect of the brain drain phenomenon. Their reasons underscore the complexity of brain drain, as it is not solely about economic and educational opportunities but also personal and emotional factors. Their circumstances highlight the importance of developing strategies to tackle brain drain, extending beyond simply improving economic and educational conditions in their home countries. It is also necessary to foster a sense of connection and belonging amongst potential returnees, to augment the appeal of repatriation.

#### **4.2 How does Dominican youth perceive that their private education influenced their decision to study abroad?**

The fourth theme identified during the interviews was the perceived impact of a private educational background. All participants attended both private high schools and universities. It is crucial to distinguish between participants who attended international schools versus regular Dominican private schools. Out of the 11 participants, three attended private international schools. Their responses indicate that these schools place a greater emphasis on encouraging students to study abroad. Further sections will further elaborate on how these schools provided more resources and information about studying abroad compared to regular Dominican private schools.

This theme includes two sub-themes: assistance provided during high school and assistance provided at university. This distinction is necessary because the resources and types of assistance at these two levels serve different purposes, demonstrating the nuanced ways in which private education can aid the process of studying abroad.

Five participants stated that they did not receive any resources or information about studying abroad while in high school. They mentioned that their schools only provided information about local universities, if any at all. All of these participants attended regular Dominican private schools, where the language of instruction is Spanish and the Dominican curriculum is followed. In these schools, the participants stated how the idea of studying abroad was neither encouraged nor promoted.

**Except 54.** *“ In high school, never. It was a very local high school. It was quite small, I would say. So that subject was not like even on the talking with us. ”* (MSA2)

HSS1 and MSA1 expressed their reluctance to receive assistance from their high schools. They both conveyed dissatisfaction with the schools they attended and the decisions made there. HSS1 stated that,

despite desiring assistance, he did not trust the school with his documents. This indicates that the decision to study abroad can sometimes be more of an individual choice.

This underlines the importance of trust in the decision-making process for studying abroad. Despite the potential benefits of assistance, if the students do not have faith in their schools, they may choose to navigate the process independently. This could potentially result in missed opportunities, given that schools might be able to provide resources and expertise that individual students may lack.

**Excerpt 55.** *“No, I didn't need the help. I mean, the help would have been necessary in some steps. For now, I'm trying to apply for the scholarship. I have it, but I need to provide proof that I live in the Dominican Republic, which started this month. I'm still trying to figure that out. But I wouldn't trust them to help me with stuff like that.”* (HHS1)

**Excerpt 56.** *“I didn't want to have anything in connection with my school [...] I did not enjoy my experience in school in general, so I, anything that they will have recommended will have fallen on deaf ears, because I did not, I did not enjoy or respect what they told me, I did not have a good experience there, so I wouldn't have listened, probably.”* (MSA1)

On the other end of the spectrum, some participants shared that their schools provided ample resources and information about studying abroad. These resources included college fairs, career counseling, exam preparation, access to the SAT, interviews with college scouts, and provision of recommendation letters and transcripts.

Interestingly, most of the students who mentioned these resources were from international schools, highlighting that such schools often provide these resources to enhance students' chances of admission to universities abroad. This suggests that the type of school a student attends can significantly impact the level of support they receive in their pursuit of studying abroad.

HSS2 noted how many of his classmates found their universities through the college fairs, underscoring the value of this resource. Additionally, the support provided by these schools can assist applicants in ways that personal networks, such as relatives or friends, might not, given their experience with the process and knowledge of the necessary steps for successful admission or scholarship application.

In this regard, these schools can be seen as another form of migration network, aiding migration by providing this support and information.

**Excerpt 57.** *“A lot of my classmates the universities that they're going to they found out through those college fairs”* (HSS2)

**Excerpt 58.** *“We had access to taking the SAT. That's helpful [...] We had preps for those exams that we would have to take to study abroad.”* (MSL1)

**Excerpt 59.** *“ I know that my friends that went to school in the states they were like guided through the application process [...] you have to write an essay and you have to do all these things and I know we had teachers that helped students do that if I remember correctly.”* (MSL1)

Some participants, although never having attended an international school, have friends or acquaintances who did. They express that these schools prepare students for studying abroad, reflecting the reputation of such schools in the Dominican Republic. These observations provide an interesting perspective on the influence of international schools in shaping students' attitudes towards studying abroad.

For instance, one MSR mentioned how some of these schools conduct SAT exams, indicating that the students are being prepared for entrance into U.S. universities. MSA1, shared that their friend, who attended an upper-class school, received substantial support in applying to overseas universities, including assistance in essay writing and preparation.

These anecdotes suggest that international schools in the Dominican Republic have established a strong reputation for fostering an environment conducive to studying abroad. This reputation plays a significant role in shaping the narratives and perceptions about studying abroad, particularly among students who have not had the opportunity to attend such schools but are still influenced by their peers who did.

**Excerpt 60.** *“I know that, that there are some schools, bilingual schools, very expensive bilingual schools, that people even take the SATs because they know that the people who are studying there, their plan is to go and study in the US.”* (MSR)

**Excerpt 61.** *“A friend went to an upper-class school, and they got support with how to write the essays [...] they got weekly meetings to support them into how to apply to those universities outside of the country, and how to design their essays and trainings on how to write those essays”* (MSA1)

Out of 11 participants, nine were master's students who completed their programs abroad. Prior to this, they earned their bachelor's degrees in the Dominican Republic at local private universities. When asked about the support they received from their universities, the participants mentioned double degree programs, exchange programs, postgraduate scholarship fairs, and recommendation letters. One participant, MSL3, even found out about his master's program abroad through his home university.

The participants emphasized the influence of double degree and exchange programs in their decision to study abroad. For some, including MSA2 and MSR, these programs served as an inspiration. MSA2 was enticed by the possibility of studying abroad after learning about such programs at her university. Meanwhile, MSR seized the opportunity to study abroad for a semester as her university offered this option. She mentioned how the multitude of exchange programs at her university informed her decision to study abroad. After her exchange program, she was eager to relive the experience for a longer duration and thus, applied for a master's program abroad with the scholarship from the MESCYT. This illustrates the profound impact such experiences can have on future choices, choices they might not have considered without the information provided by their universities.

**Excerpt 62.** *“[The university] has like a double title degree. So you do like one half of the career in Dominican Republic and the other half in United States. And I think Canada too, they have like their agreements. So that was why the first insight of like, oh, I can do that.”* (MSA2)

**Excerpt 63.** *“For the exchange program, they have the exchange office, and they promote the different programs that exist, and there are tons of scholarships, because there are a lot of governments interested in this exchange programs, and they have national projects for it.”* (MSR)

However, for the case of MSA1, she pointed out that these programs were costly and without scholarships, only the affluent could afford them. This underlines the importance of financial support. Without government scholarships, most of the participants would not have chosen to study abroad. While these programs may not have directly influence her decision to study abroad, they indirectly shape perceptions of available life choices.

**Excerpt 64.** *“They had a program where you study two years of your career in the DR and two years in New York or something, but it's a really, really unaffordable program [...] It's very expensive, and it's usually only rich kids that take it. There are no scholarships for that, and it's only for New York or for another city in the United States”* (MSA1)

Another resource mentioned by the participants was recommendation letters and post-graduate fairs provided by their home universities in the Dominican Republic. These resources and information are helpful during the application process, as many scholarship applications require recommendation letters. Having one from your local university can be a significant asset. Additionally, postgraduate scholarship fairs provide valuable information about options available after completing studies. With their experience in dealing with such procedures, the information they provide can be accurate and useful for people looking to study abroad.

**Excerpt 65.** *“My university, they made me a recommendation letter to support like the process with my current university.”* (MSA3)

**Excerpt 66.** *“After I graduated, they had, like, a scholarship, and in the postgraduate scholarship fair, they send you a scholarship program opportunities.”* (MSR)

One insightful remark from MSL4 highlighted how his university adopted the "mindset" of preparing students to go to the United States. This indicates that not only international private high schools, but also universities in the Dominican Republic, are geared towards preparing their students to leave the country. This approach exacerbates the phenomenon of brain drain, as these students, especially those in higher education, are being prepared to exit the country.

**Excerpt 67.** *“The university, it has a mindset of United States, like they only think of doing doing the USMLE, that's the exam to get to the United States [...] the two top medical schools, in Dominican Republic they have like a system to get you to be competitive in the United States.”* (MSL4)



## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

As previously mentioned, an array of push and pull factors influence the decisions of international students to study and potentially reside abroad (UNESCO, 2013, as cited in Javed et al., 2019). In the context of the Dominican Republic, this study found that some of these push and pull factors are consistent with previous research on migration and international student mobility (International Organization for Migration, 2003; Javed et al., 2019; Kainth, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992; OECD, 2023). These findings align with the broader understanding of global migration patterns where individuals are often motivated by the pursuit of improved quality of life, economic prosperity, and personal growth opportunities that may not be available in their home country. However, the unique socio-economic and political landscape of the Dominican Republic also presents specific push and pull factors that contribute to the decision-making process of its youth. It is crucial to highlight that, within the context of this study, these push and pull factors not only influence the pursuit of an international degree abroad, but ultimately also affect the decision to settle abroad permanently. These factors, particularly the push factors, may contribute to the ongoing issue of brain drain in the country.

This study reveals an overlap between the push factors driving migration and international student mobility mentioned in previous studies (International Organization for Migration, 2003; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992; OECD, 2023), and those cited by the participants of the study. Participants indicated that one of the primary reasons driving them to pursue an education abroad is the low quality of education in the Dominican Republic. The spread of university rankings and other global education ratings has increased the global student awareness of the quality differences among higher education systems (OECD, 2023a). Furthermore, the consistently low ranking of the Dominican Republic in international standings indicates that participants value high-quality education and are aware of the limitations within their own country's higher education institutions. Both the IOM (2003) and the OECD (2023a) have recognized limited access to quality education in their home countries as a critical push factor propelling individuals towards migration and international student mobility. This implies that although the trend of seeking education abroad is not exclusive to the Dominican Republic, the low educational standards in the country propel individuals to pursue education overseas. Notwithstanding the attempts to elevate the educational quality over the years (Edwards Jr. et al., 2020), the country continues to grapple with stiff international competition. In order to retain its highly skilled workforce

and intellectuals, it is imperative for the country to promote research opportunities and enhance the quality of education at both the school and tertiary levels.

Additionally, participants identified the saturated job market in the Dominican Republic as a significant factor motivating their decision to study abroad. They cited limited opportunities and low salaries as primary sources of dissatisfaction with the country's labour market. Many Dominican youths share this sentiment, with low wages and youth unemployment suggested as key reasons for high rates of brain drain (Dominican Today, 2020). This aligns with previous research that identifies factors such as disregard for local talent, underemployment, and low wages driving migration abroad (International Organization for Migration, 2003). These economic considerations, which encourage students to seek opportunities abroad, highlight the need for the country to improve its job market and provide better opportunities for its youth.

Furthermore, participants cited the unavailability of their preferred study program in their home country as a push factor. This factor, also noted by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), motivates international students to study abroad. This absence of opportunities underscores a deficiency in the Dominican higher education system, compelling students to find programs unavailable at home in other countries. These individuals often work in innovative fields like technology or sciences, which can boost a country's innovation and technological development. This highlights a previously mentioned negative consequence of brain drain. The departure of these individuals hampers the country's technological advancement and innovation, both of which are vital for its economic development. This suggests that the Dominican Republic's higher education system needs to diversify its course offerings to keep local talent.

This study identified a specific factor related to the Dominican context. Many participants reported feelings of disconnection and dissatisfaction with Dominican society. This disappointment might be exacerbated by the country's lack of safety and opportunities for advancement in their field, which were other push factors mentioned. This factor, while not commonly featured in the literature concerning push-pull factors, may resonate with many international students. These sentiments of dissatisfaction and alienation from their home countries not only incentivize them to seek education abroad, but also significantly influence their decisions to permanently migrate, a notion that was recurrently expressed by numerous participants in this study.

This study also discovered overlaps between the pull factors driving migration and international student mobility, previously mentioned in other studies (Javed et al., 2019; Kainth, 2009), with those cited by the participants of this study. The most mentioned pull factor was good opportunities. The participants' reference to "good opportunities" as a secure lifestyle, improved job prospects, the chance to expand their knowledge, and the ability to advance in their chosen careers indicates a strong motivation to seek better living and working conditions abroad. This aligns with Kainth's (2009) findings, where similar opportunities were identified as significant pull factors for migration. In relation to international student mobility, students also consider better opportunities such as improved quality of life, growth and development, and a higher paying career as factors attracting them to study abroad (Javed et al., 2019). The emphasis on economic prospects, career expectations, and better working conditions shows that the participants are seeking a substantial improvement in their quality of life, which they believe can be achieved by studying and potentially residing abroad.

Several pull factors identified were unique to the Dominican context, such as possessing familial ties and experiencing an emotional connection to the country of destination. A significant number of participants articulated how familial connections in the destination country considerably influenced their decision to pursue studies abroad. They also indicated a profound sense of connection to the lifestyle and culture of the countries they selected for their studies. Subsequently, these factors, in combination with others, led to their decision to permanently migrate. This underscores the considerable influence of individual factors and network roles on the decision-making process regarding studying abroad and permanent migration.

Migrant networks, including family, friends, and co-workers, play a role in influencing the decision to study abroad. According to the migrant-mediated network theory, these networks "provide a variety of benefits, including kinds of connections and information needed to make migration possible, plus funds needed to cover the cost of migration" (Dolfin & Genicot, 2010 as cited in Y. Lee et al., 2017). These migrant networks interacted closely with the identified pull and push and pull factors in this study.

Migrant networks interact with push factors in several ways, including mitigating risk, offering information and guidance, and providing economic support. Migration often involves perceived risks, which these networks can help reduce (Massey et al., 1993). Knowing someone who has successfully migrated can alleviate concerns about the journey and the initial adjustment period in the new country.

These networks may also encourage people to study abroad due to the push factors in their home country. For instance, participants cited a lack of safety and poor quality of education in the Dominican Republic as significant push factors influencing their decision. Hearing positive experiences from these migrant networks can reinforce their decision, convincing them it is the right choice.

Financial support was a significant factor influencing the participants' decision to study abroad, particularly given the push factor of monetary reasons. As they mentioned, studying higher education in the Dominican Republic is expensive, so they weighed the cost of studying abroad against staying in their home country. While many participants decided to pursue scholarships, these did not cover all the costs of emigration and studying abroad. Their families, therefore, offered crucial support. As De Hass (2010b) noted, migrant networks often provide financial assistance to cover travel and migration-related expenses. The families offered not only emotional support but also financial assistance, which greatly influenced their decision to study abroad, as they would not have been able to support themselves otherwise. This underscores the fundamental role that familial support plays in the decision-making process for studying abroad.

On the other hand, migrant networks can interact with pull factors in the way of employment opportunities and social support systems. These networks can facilitate employment access by providing job leads, referrals, and occasionally direct job opportunities (Waldinger & Lichter, 2003). In this way, these networks can be a crucial resource for individuals, enhancing their prospects of successful integration into the job market of their new country.

The most significant pull factor mentioned by the participants was the allure of "good opportunities". When referring to good opportunities, many participants mentioned improved job prospects and career advancement opportunities. For instance, one participant explained how her partner had an acquaintance willing to offer her a job in the destination country upon graduation. This is a clear example of how migrant networks might enhance the pull factors as these connections may allow the participants to have a better chance at achieving these "good opportunities" they seek when deciding to study abroad and stay.

A welcoming community of migrants from a similar origin can enhance the appeal of a destination country (Levitt, 2001). The existence of familial connections in the host country not only acted as substantial pull factors but the presence of other migrant networks, such as friendships and romantic

partnerships, further increased the appeal of the country. Participants noted that these networks provided housing, emotional support, and financial assistance. This significantly affected those with accessible networks in the receiving country, rendering it more attractive. As a result, the choice to study abroad became not only more desirable but also more feasible, as they would not be isolated upon arrival in their destination country.

It is noteworthy that the participants' stage in the migration process may have influenced their assessment of the push and pull factors shaping their decisions to study and eventually reside abroad. This research encompassed participants at diverse stages of migration. For instance, high school students, who had decided to study abroad but had not yet initiated the process, represented the pre-migration stage. Their perceptions of push and pull factors might be shaped more by their expectations of life post-migration than by concrete experiences, suggesting that their viewpoints may be largely predicated on assumptions rather than tangible realities.

Conversely, the master's students currently engaged in study abroad programs were in the midst of their migration process. Their firsthand experiences abroad could potentially shape their push and pull factors, thereby influencing their decisions to either return or remain abroad. One participant expressed a desire to return to the Dominican Republic following negative experiences abroad. In contrast, other participants who were currently residing abroad expressed a desire to stay, suggesting that the experience of living abroad might amplify the pull factors, thereby reinforcing their decision to remain abroad.

For participants who had completed their studies and had resided in their host country for an extended period, they were in the post-migration stage. Their positive experiences, such as improved job opportunities, higher salaries, and enhanced lifestyles, could intensify the pull factors, thereby solidifying their decision not to repatriate to the Dominican Republic. Furthermore, the social connections established and cultural familiarity gained over the years could further cement their desire to remain in the host country.

Additionally, the influence of migrant networks might differ at these various stages. Some participants studying abroad developed friendships and romantic relationships in their host countries, which could augment the pull factors and their desire to stay abroad. Nevertheless, despite the participants being at different stages of migration, their responses regarding their decisions to remain abroad were largely

consistent. This suggests that while their specific determinants and motives might differ, they share a common sentiment of permanent migration from their home country.

Regarding the question of how participants perceive their private education influenced their decision to study abroad, their responses indicated that they did not believe their private education had a significant impact on their decision. Nonetheless, their private schooling might have played a role in guiding the participants towards international education.

As the participants noted, some international schools and elite universities may encourage their students to study abroad. This is where the term "channelling" becomes relevant. According to Olivier et al., 2018, channelling is a process involving both the current school students attend and the future educational institution they aim for. Both institutions play crucial roles in this process. The sending institution customizes its teachings to guide students along a specific path, while the receiving institution "plays a decisive role through the ways in which they attract, select, and retain students" (Olivier et al., 2018). The participants who attended private international schools shared how their schools promoted college fairs and exam preparation. Others mentioned that some elite universities foster a "mindset" of studying in countries like the United States.

Additionally, their expanded horizons from private education may have played a role in their decision to study abroad. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) posit that individual decision-making occurs within their "*horizons for action*", a concept referring to the range of opportunities individuals perceive as accessible or achievable. This "horizon" is bounded by factors such as social class, educational background, and personal experiences (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Based on the responses from participants, the prospect of studying abroad was consistently perceived as a viable and often expected course of action. The participants' private education and social circle may have contributed to this perception. Many students have access to a plethora of resources and information in their schools, which they might not have received had they studied in the public sector. Moreover, the "expectation" to study abroad is particularly prevalent among the middle classes, as individuals from lower socio-economic strata may not share this expectation. Furthermore, observing others in their immediate social circle who have studied abroad serves to reinforce its attainability. They witness the advantages of this pursuit, particularly from those with similar backgrounds, thereby solidifying the notion that they, too, can undertake study abroad.

## **5.1 Limitations**

Despite the comprehensive nature of this research, there are a few limitations to consider. These limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the results and conclusions of this study.

Firstly, it is important to note that this research relied heavily on self-reported data. This method, while valuable for gaining personal insights, could potentially introduce bias into the results. Respondents' subjective experiences and interpretations of questions can vary greatly, leading to inconsistencies in the data. Therefore, while self-reported data can provide a useful glimpse into individual perspectives, it is crucial to bear in mind the potential limitations of this approach when interpreting the findings.

Secondly, this study did not incorporate a comparison group like Dominican students who opted to continue their studies in the Dominican Republic. Such a group could offer a more nuanced insight into the factors influencing students' choices. Another comparison group could consist of Dominican students from public education who decided to study abroad and remain there. This would enable a comparison between the public and private sectors in the Dominican Republic, assessing the various resources students from each sector receive when they decided to study abroad.

Finally, this study did not examine the long-term outcomes and implications of studying abroad, such as career progression, satisfaction, and impact on the home country, which could be interesting avenues for future research.

## **5.2 Recommendations for further research**

Future research might benefit from adopting a comparative approach that focuses on understanding the experiences of Dominican students who opt to pursue their education within their home country and those who prefer to study abroad. This comparative analysis could provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the factors that play a significant role in influencing students' academic choices. In particular, it could help delve deeper into the motivations, aspirations, and expectations that guide students in their decision-making process. Furthermore, examining the potential benefits and challenges associated with each choice could offer a well-rounded view of the implications of these decisions. For instance, studying in one's home country could provide the comfort of a familiar environment and culture, while studying abroad could offer exposure to a diverse cultural milieu and a

global perspective. Therefore, such a study could contribute significantly to our understanding of students' academic preferences and decision-making processes.

Research efforts could be also extended to concentrate on the long-term outcomes of studying abroad, encompassing aspects such as the progression of one's career, personal satisfaction, and the potential impacts on the home country. This could involve a comprehensive and detailed process of tracking students over a significant number of years, meticulously observing how their careers evolve, and how their personal lives, attitudes, and values are influenced and developed as a result of their study abroad experience. Additionally, the ripple effects on their home countries, be it cultural, economic, or social, could also be a noteworthy aspect of such long-term studies.

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of international education, further research could be undertaken to examine the impact of studying abroad on students from different sectors, specifically public versus private, in the Dominican Republic. This expanded study would delve deeper into the disparities between these two groups, providing a more nuanced understanding of the resources available to students from different backgrounds. By scrutinizing the availability and utilization of these resources, we can gain insights into how these factors can influence their decisions to study abroad. This research could potentially highlight the barriers faced by students from different sectors and propose methods to ensure that more opportunities for international education are accessible to all students, regardless of their background.

Moreover, a more detailed examination of the significant role that family and peer networks play in swaying students' decisions to pursue academic opportunities abroad could serve as a fascinating perspective for upcoming studies. This research could delve into the dynamics of these networks, exploring how different factors such as familial support, peer influence, cultural understanding, and previous exposure to international experiences can impact a student's choice to study in a foreign country. This would not only add to the current body of knowledge but could also provide valuable insights for educational institutions looking to increase their international student population.

In conclusion, the decisions made by students regarding studying abroad are complex and influenced by a variety of factors. Future research that delves into these intricacies, from the impact of educational backgrounds to the role of familial and peer networks, will be invaluable. Such studies will not only contribute to our understanding of the brain drain phenomenon but also provide key insights for



educational policy and practice. This can potentially lead to more balanced academic opportunities and a reduction in the brain drain phenomenon that many countries, including the Dominican Republic, are currently grappling with.

*AI was used to proofread the text and correct any spelling or grammar mistakes. However, it was not used to generate ideas or interpretations. In order to respect the privacy of the participants, no personal data was entered.*

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Interview questions

#### Background & Warm up

Tell me a little bit about yourself: could you please introduce yourself?

- Can you tell me about your school life? Or school history?

#### Main questions

*[Depending on their responses, I will decide whether to ask follow-up questions or more questions.*

*Additionally, the questions are not numbered as their order will be determined by the answers given.]*

- **Question:** Can you tell me about your plans to study abroad?
  - What motivated you to study abroad?
  - Did you plan to continue your studies in Dominican Republic, or you always knew you wanted to study abroad?
- **Question:** How did you decide on the country and university you wanted to attend?
  - What factors did you consider when making the decision to study abroad?
  - Did you apply for a scholarship or are your parents funding everything?
- **Question:** Has your school provided resources or information about studying abroad? (**High school students**)
  - If yes, in what ways?
  - If no, would you have like them to provide some?

Follow up questions:

- What options have the school/teachers presented to you?
- Do you feel the school values some of these options better than other?
- **Question:** When you were in high school/university, did your school provided resources or information about studying abroad? (**Master's students**)
  - If yes, in what ways?
  - If no, would you have like them to provide some?

Follow up questions:

- What options have the school/teachers presented to you?
- Do you feel the school values some of these options better than other?
- **Question:** Have your teachers/ student counsellor helped you in any way during this process?
  - If yes, in what ways?
    - To what degree are your teachers/student counselor involved in the HE counseling?
    - What was the role of your homeroom teacher/student counselor in the application process?
  - If not, would you have wanted them to provide some help?
- **Question:** How did your family and peers react to your decision to study abroad?

Follow up:

Did your parents encourage this decision? Do you talk with your parents about your studies?

- Did their reaction affect or influence your decision?
- Has your family provided assistance/support during this process?
  - If so, in what ways? If not, would you have wanted them to?
- **Question:** Have you come across anyone who has studied abroad before?
  - If yes,
    - Where did you meet them? (Through school, social media, fair..)
    - Have you been in contact with them and received some sort of assistance during the process?
  - If no, do you feel it would have made the process easier if you knew someone?
- **Question:** Do you have any relatives, friends, or contacts in the country where you are planning to study?
  - If so, did this influence your decision to study there?
- **Question:** What are your plans after completing your studies?

Follow up:

Do you plan on returning to the Dominican Republic after completing your studies?  
(YES/NO/MAYBE)

- If yes, why would you want to come back after your studies?

- If not, what factors influenced your decision to stay? What would need to happen or change for you to consider returning to DR after your studies, or is it a definitive no?
- **Question:** How do you think your study abroad experience will impact your future career and life opportunities?
  - Would you like to start working right after your studies?
  - Do you think it will give you more opportunities in future jobs? (Why/why not)
- **Question:** What factors influenced your decision to stay in the country where you did your studies? (**Master's students currently living abroad**)

## **Appendix 2 Privacy notice**

**Information for participants of the research project** “Exploring the Decisions of Dominican Youth to Study abroad: A Study on the Brain Drain Phenomenon in the Dominican Republic”.

You are taking part in a scientific study conducted at the University of Turku. This notice describes how your personal data will be processed in the study.

### **1. Data Controller**

University of Turku, FI-20014 Turku, Finland

### **2. Parties involved in research conducted as a collaboration project and division of responsibilities**

Responsible researcher: Andrea Pérez Rodríguez, [aperod@utu.fi](mailto:aperod@utu.fi)

Main research supervisor: Jenni Tikkanen, university lecturer, [jenni.tikkanen@utu.fi](mailto:jenni.tikkanen@utu.fi) (Finland)

Second research supervisor: Suvi Jokila, postdoctoral researcher [suvi.jokila@utu.fi](mailto:suvi.jokila@utu.fi) (Finland)

### **3. Research project leader or responsible group**

Andrea Pérez Rodríguez, [aperod@utu.fi](mailto:aperod@utu.fi)

### **4. Description of the study and the purposes of processing personal data**

Data for the research "Exploring the Decisions of Dominican Youth to Study abroad: A Study on the Brain Drain Phenomenon in the Dominican Republic" is collected from interviews with high school students and master's students in the Dominican Republic. This data is solely used for research purposes. For identification purposes, participants' names are collected, but pseudonyms are used to protect their identities. The participants will select their own pseudonyms. Information regarding participants' future study plans (university, country, major) is collected. This data is used to draw comparisons and conclusions relevant to the study. However, participants will not be directly linked to their future study plans. Such information will only be used to draw generalized conclusions.

### **5. Contact details of the Data Protection Officer**

The Data Protection Officer of the University of Turku is available at contact address: [dpo@utu.fi](mailto:dpo@utu.fi).

## 6. Persons processing personal data in the study

Andrea Pérez Rodríguez, aperod@utu.fi

## 7. Name, nature and duration of the study

Name of the study: Exploring the Decisions of Dominican Youth to Study abroad: A Study on the Brain Drain Phenomenon in the Dominican Republic

Participants will respond to interview questions about their motivations and the factors that influenced their decision to studying abroad.

Duration of the processing of personal data: The research data will be retained until 2026, for a total of two years. Only the principal investigator will have access to this data. The electronically stored data will be kept on a web drive provided by the University of Turku. The main researcher can access it using a personal username and password.

## 8. Lawful basis of processing

Personal data is processed on the following basis, which is based on Article 6(1) of the General Data Protection Regulation:

- data subject's consent;
- processing is based for the performance of a contract;
- compliance with a legal obligation to which the controller is subject;
- processing is necessary in order to protect the vital interest of the data subject;
- performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller:
  - scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes;
  - archiving of research materials or cultural heritage materials;
- legitimate interest pursued by the controller or by a third party.

## 9. Personal data included in the research materials

Only data from participants who have consented will be used in the research. Directly identifying information will be collected from the participants, including their name, grade level, future study plans, and school experience. The main questions will focus on the factors influencing the participants' decisions to study abroad. Also, participants will be asked about their families' reactions and their future plans after completing their studies.

At the end of data collection, all direct identifiers will be removed. The controller will collect email addresses and phone numbers and store them separately from the rest of the research data, following the University of Turku's data security guidelines. The results will be reported in a manner that prevents the identification of individual respondents. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of the participants.

The pseudonymized research data will be stored until 4/2026. Access to the research data will be limited to the University of Turku, who are involved in the "Exploring the Decisions of Dominican Youth to Study abroad: A Study on the Brain Drain in the Dominican Republic" study. The electronically stored data will be kept on a web drive provided by the University of Turku, which the researcher can access using a personal username and password.

#### **10. Sensitive personal data**

There is no sensitive personal data that will be processed in the study.

#### **11. Sources of personal data**

The personal data is collected directly from the participants.

#### **12. Transfer and disclosure of the personal data to third parties**

The personal data will not be transferred to other recipients outside the University of Turku/research group/researcher.

#### **13. Transfer or disclosure of personal data to countries outside the EU/European Economic Area**

Personal data will not be transferred outside the EU/ European Economic Area.

#### **14. Automated decisions**

No automated decisions are made.

Safeguards to protect the personal data:

- The data is confidential.
- Protection of manual material:  
Written material is pseudonymized.
- Personal data processed in IT systems:

Materials that are pseudonymized are stored behind a username and password.

other:

Processing of direct identifiers:

- Direct identifiers will be removed in the analysis phase  
 The material to be analysed includes direct identifiers.

Reason:

### **15. Processing of personal data after the completion of the study**

The research material will be deleted in 2026.

Where will the material be archived and for how long: The research data is securely stored on the University of Turku servers, accessible only to the researchers conducting the study. It is protected by a username and password. The data will be kept for two years, until 2026.

### **16. Your rights as a data subject, and exceptions to these rights**

Data subject has the right to lodge a complaint to the supervisory authority if the data subject considers that the processing of his or her personal data has infringed the applicable data protection legislation. Contact details of the Data Protection Officer of The University of Turku by e-mail: [DPO@utu.fi](mailto:DPO@utu.fi)

Requests to exercise the rights of a registered will follow the controller's data request process.

#### **Exceptions to data subject rights**

Under the General Data Protection Regulation and the Finnish Data Protection Act, certain exceptions to the rights of data subjects can be made when personal data is processed in scientific research and fulfilling the rights would render impossible or seriously impair the achievement of the objectives of the processing (in this case, scientific research).

The need to make exceptions to the rights of data subjects will always be assessed on a case by case basis. It is likely that exceptions to the following rights will be necessary in this study:

- Right of access (GDPR Article 15)
- Right to rectification (GDPR Article 16)
- Right to erasure (GDPR Article 17)
- Right to restriction of processing (GDPR Article 18)
- Right to data portability (GDPR Article 20)

Right to object (GDPR Article 21)

Reasons and the extend for the exceptions: Exceptions to the rights of the data subject may occur when the data processing and analysis have advanced to a point where it is either impossible to extract an individual respondent's data due to the data being anonymized, or where doing so would significantly disrupt the research work.

**Right to lodge a complaint**

You have the right to lodge a complaint with the Data Protection Ombudsman if you think your personal data has been processed in violation of applicable data protection laws.

Contact details of Data Protection Ombudsman:

Office of the Data Protection Ombudsman

Visiting address: Lintulahdenkuja 4, 00530 Helsinki

Postal address: P.O. Box 800, 00531 Helsinki, Finland

E-mail: tietosuoja(at)om.fi

Switchboard: +358 (0)29 566 6700





## 5. Confidentiality

I would like to interview you "on the record," which allows me to identify you in any publications resulting from this research. However, I won't use your real name in any quotations or reports. Instead, I'll use a pseudonym of your choice, and any identifying details will be omitted or obscured.

The video recordings and any electronic or printed transcripts will be stored in encrypted files on the university's web drive. These files will be protected with a username and password. Two years after the publication of this research, all files will be deleted.

### Authorization

**By signing this form, you authorize the use and disclosure of the following information for this research:**

I authorize the use of my records, any observations, and findings found during the course of this study for education, publication and/or presentation.

## 6. Voluntary Participation and Authorization

Your decision to participate in this study is fully within your control and completely voluntary. You have the right to choose whether or not you want to be involved in this research. If, for any reason, you decide not to participate, please be assured that it will not have any negative impacts or consequences for you.

## 7. Withdrawal from the Study and/or Withdrawal of Authorization

You have the right to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. If you decide to withdraw from the study, any information collected about you up to the point of withdrawal will continue to be used for the purpose of understanding the research question and will not be removed.

**Name of Participant:**

**Date:**

**I voluntarily agree to participate in this research.**

**Yes**

**No**

**Person obtaining consent:**

I understand that I will be given a copy of this Consent Form

#### Appendix 4 List of themes, sub-themes, and codes

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes	Frequency
Motivations for studying abroad			0
	Push factors		0
		Lack of safety in DR	4
		Low quality of education in DR	4
		Disconnection and disappointment from Dominican society	4
		Saturated job market	3
		Monetary reasons	2
		Dysfunctional government	2
		Unavailability of desired master's program	2
		Less opportunities to improve in their field	1
	Pull factors		0
		Good opportunities	5
		New experiences	4
		Family ties	3
		No language barrier	3
		Quality of education	3
		Economic cost	2
		Recognition of international education	2
		Feeling connected to the receiving country	2
		Quality of life	2
		Support from the government in Europe	1
How networks affect their decision of studying abroad			0
	The role of family		0
		Family supported and encouraged their decision	16
		Family provided financial aid	6
		Had family in the receiving country	5
	The role of friendships		0
		Friends had positive reactions	2
		Friends had negative reactions	1
		Friends had mixed reactions	2
		Had friends already studying/living abroad	9
		Friends assisted during the process	6
	The role of co-workers		0
		Was motivated by their boss to studied abroad	1

		Saw the stress of co-workers juggling work and study, and wanted to avoid it	1
	The role of partners		0
		Emotional & financial support from partner during the process	1
		Partner was the reason for going back to DR	1
Financial support: a determinant factor			0
	Scholarship		0
		Received a scholarship from the Dominican government	5
		Received a scholarship from the university	3
	Not required to pay tuition fees		0
		Didn't have to pay fees because is a European citizen	1
		Didn't have to pay fee because studied medicine	1
	Self-financed due to unsuccessful scholarship application		0
		Applied for the scholarship from the Dominican government and didn't get it	1
Private education as a factor in deciding to study abroad			0
	Assistance provided during high school		0
		The school had college fairs with universities from abroad	3
		The school provided a career counsellor	3
		Teachers provided assistance during the application process	2
		The school provided preparation and access for the SAT	1
		The school provided recommendation letter and transcripts	1
		The school didn't provide resources or information about studying abroad	5
		Didn't want to receive assistance from their high school	2
	Assistance provided in university		0
		University had a double degree program	3
		University had an exchange program	1
		University provided recommendation letter	2
		University offered post-graduate scholarship fairs	1
		Received the information about the master's from his home university	1
		University didn't provide resources or information about studying abroad	1
Post-Study Plans: Staying Abroad or Returning Home			0
	Stay abroad		5
		Definitely doesn't want to go back to DR	5
		Wants to find a job after finishing their studies	4
		Wants to find a way to stay in the host country after finishing the master's	2
		Already has a job opportunity after finishing the master's	1

	Got back to DR	2
	Had a negative experience during their studies abroad	1
	Has personal relationships in DR	2
	Wants to start their own business	1
	Attachment to DR	1
	Language barrier in receiving	1
	Want to advance in their career	1
	Already living abroad	4
	Got a job in the receiving country	2
	Quality of life and education	2
	Feeling connected to the receiving country	2
	Disconnect from DR	2
Total number of codes		175