

Drivers and trajectories of multinational migrations of West African international students

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Abstract

This article focuses on international students from West Africa and their migration trajectories. Based on in-depth interviews, we investigate the migration drivers and students' motivations to become international students. Building on the analytical framework of multinational stepwise migration, we also explore their aspirations, obstacles and coping strategies at different stages of their migratory paths. This study maintains that this form of international mobility is not solely driven by academic aspirations. We find that international student migration is an increasingly important part of larger mobility projects for West African students. The paper also relates to facilitators of migration, constrained opportunities in the home countries and restrictive mobility regimes that, in conjunction, have impacted the stepwise migration toward the Global North. To fulfil their broader mobility projects, African students often have to engage in complex stepwise migrations and face various struggles and drawbacks. This study has demonstrated that African students from middle-class backgrounds are not exempt from these struggles.

KEYWORDS

Global North, Global South, international students, stepwise migration, West Africa

1 | INTRODUCTION

The number of students who cross an international border to pursue a degree has increased significantly, from 2 million in 1998 to 5.3 million in 2007. Between 2007 and 2017, the share of mobile students grew by 5% per year. By 2027, international students are expected to reach 3% of the entire student population globally (UNESCO, 2019). Host-country ranking is dominated by three English-speaking countries: the United States (USA), the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia. The USA is the destination of almost one in five mobile students; however, in 2017, Germany moved to fourth place, closely followed by France (Börjesson, 2017).¹

In terms of nominal numbers, international student migrations are predominantly composed of students from populous countries in Asia, such as China and India (Börjesson, 2017).² However, in relative terms, university students from Sub-Saharan Africa are among the most mobile international students globally (Campus France, 2020).³ About 6% of the 8.1 million students on the continent have crossed a border, compared to the global average of 2.4%. Nigeria has the largest share of university students outside of their country. Outbound mobility has also increased in

¹See https://ressources.campusfrance.org/publications/chiffres_cles/en/chiffres_cles_2020_en.pdf.

²See <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/17d19cd9-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/17d19cd9-en>.

³An internationally mobile student is an individual who has physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective of participating in educational activities in a destination country, where the destination country is different from his or her country of origin (UNESCO, 2019).

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Ghana, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Angola, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Kenya. Traditionally, ties with former colonies have made France the most popular destination for students from Sub-Saharan Africa, with other major destinations including the USA and the UK. However, for the past 10 years, the mobility of African students has become more diversified, with China, Malaysia, Canada, India and Saudi Arabia becoming essential destinations (Campus France, 2020; Mulvey & Mason, 2022; Mulvey, 2021).

International student mobility trends and patterns have been explored in previous research (Börjesson, 2017; Kondakci, 2011; Leung, 2013; Mazzaro & Soutar, 2002; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014; Sadri & Chaichian, 2018), and several previous studies have also discussed student mobility challenges and prospects in the African higher education system (Berriane, 2015; Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015). The studies on international student migrations from the Global South often stress that these migrations are highly restricted where the student visa remains the only viable opportunity to migrate to higher-tier countries (Hawthorne 2014; Luthra & Platt, 2016; Tan & Hugo, 2017). According to the studies, international student visas may provide an opportunity to acquire work and permanent settlement in the Global North, which also explains why many international students do not return after graduation (Baas, 2019; Wu & Wilkes, 2017).

Discussions on international students often focus on how they transition from student status to permanent residence in the destination countries, in a process termed *two-step migration* (Baas, 2019; Hawthorne, 2014). However, there is a growing awareness that many students also move onwards (Hawthorne, 2014; Tan & Hugo, 2017; Wu & Wilkes, 2017). Several recent studies on African international student migrants also challenge the conventional stay-return binary that prevails in the literature on international students showing that many students migrate onward (Jagganath & Singh, 2021; Mulvey, 2021). However, drivers and trajectories of multinational *stepwise migration* of international students from West Africa to the Global North are still largely under-researched.

Building on these recent contributions, we explore these three interrelated research questions: (i) What trajectories of multinational migration can we identify among international students from West Africa? (ii) What factors influence the choice of destination countries and the patterns of their migrations? (iii) How can we explain the stepwise migrations of West African students towards the Global North and their relocations to the top-tier countries?

This article is divided into several interconnected sections. First, we outline previous relevant research and relate it to the core drivers of international student mobility from a West African perspective. This section will also clarify relevant concepts of serial and stepwise migration and how this study on international students relates to such an analytical framework. Second, we discuss our methodological approach and sample, including how we handled the practical methodological challenges. In the remaining sections of the article, we explore West African international students' experiences and migration trajectories in detail. Here, we also identify and discuss migration drivers, coping strategies and motivations that have impacted their serial and stepwise migrations.

1.1 | West African international student migration and relevant previous research

West Africa is located within areas of Africa that lie below the Sahara Desert and is a region within Sub-Saharan Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest number of university students among all the global regions; the current higher education enrolment ratio for Sub-Saharan Africa is 9.4%, which falls well below the worldwide average of 38%.⁴ For further comparison, the higher education participation rate within OECD countries was 70% in 2014 and was even higher in North America, at just above 84%.⁵

The region of West Africa consists of 16 different countries, including Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Benin, which are the origin countries of the informants in this study. Countries in this geographic location include African countries formerly colonised by European powers (especially France and Britain). The people of West Africa have been through different phases of exploitation and colonial domination, in addition to years of political, economic, social and cultural transformations (Berriane, 2015; Coe & Pauli, 2020). However, West Africa is currently one of the fastest-growing regions on the African continent, both demographically and economically. The current population of West Africa is nearly 419 million, based on the United Nations' latest estimates. Compared to, for example, the EU, which has a median age that reached 44.1 in 2021,⁶ the average age in Western Africa is just 18.2 years.⁷ Accordingly, there is a considerable share of young people within the West African context. The middle class is also one of the fastest growing globally.⁸ However, this group still has a massive unmet demand for future career prospects (Adefulu et al., 2020; Mohamedbhai, 2011). In conjunction with these developments, the share of international students from West Africa has increased significantly in recent years.

Figure 1 shows that the major receiving countries of West African international students are the USA, France, the UK and Canada. The choices of the destination country reflect previous research and highlight that the most popular destination countries for international students are English-speaking countries (Bista et al., 2018; Börjesson, 2017; de Wit & Altbach, 2021). These countries are highly ranked in the world system in terms of economic development, stability and having a high standard of living, which further contributes to their popularity among international students (Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). However, the picture becomes more complex when we add countries that are placed as the fifth most popular destinations for West African international students. After the four most popular destinations in Western Europe and North America, several semiperipheral destinations like Ukraine, Malaysia,

⁴See <https://www.wathi.org/sub-saharan-africa-tertiary-education-the-docs-world-bank-december-2020/>.

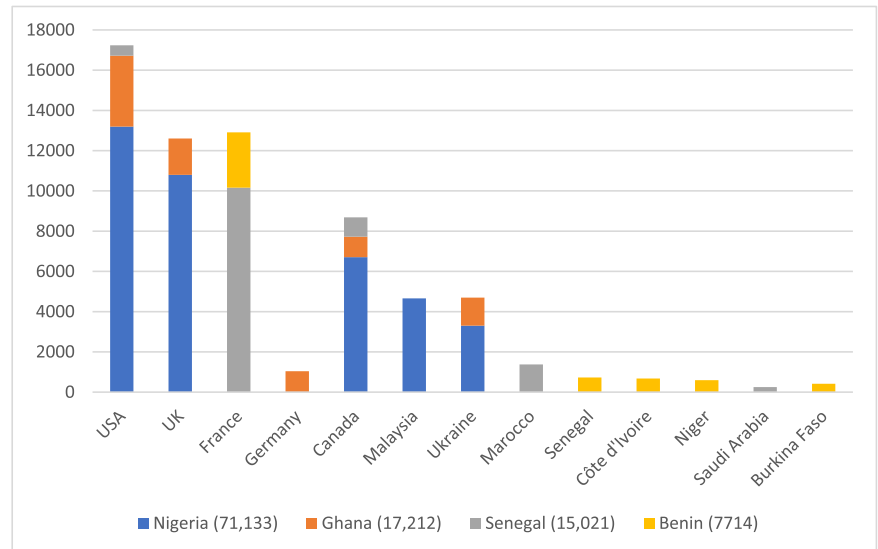
⁵See <https://ourworldindata.org/tertiary-education>.

⁶See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_structure_and_ageing#Median_age_is_highest_in_Italy.

⁷See <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/western-africa-population/>.

⁸See <https://www.osiwa.org/newsroom/beyond-the-numbers-west-africas-middle-class/>.

FIGURE 1 West African international students by country of origin (total) and their five largest receiving countries (2019). *Source:* The figure is own compilation based on UNESCO's data. See <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>.



Saudi Arabia and neighbouring countries within the African continent stand out.

Several studies on international student migrations identify various factors influencing students' migration trajectories. For example, some scholars argue that student migration follows the market logic, proximity logic and colonial logic (Börjesson, 2017). Others concur that students' migratory decisions are influenced by income levels in destination countries, historical ties, common language, costs of migrations and education, and the possibility of permanent resettlement in the destination countries (Baas, 2019; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014; Valenta & Garvik, 2023). We build on these studies in conjunction with the recent studies on multiple migrations of international students from the Global South (Mulvey, 2021; Tan & Hugo, 2017; Zijlstra, 2020).

Recent studies on international students have highlighted that semiperipheral countries like Malaysia (Singh, 2021), China (Wen & Hu, 2019), Ukraine (Hladchenko, 2023) and Turkey (Kondakci, 2011) have also gained popularity as destination countries for international student mobility from the Global South as these countries are more affordable than prime student destinations in the Global North (Findlay et al., 2012; Mulvey, 2021; Sadri & Chaichian, 2018; Zijlstra, 2020).

It is also evident that several of the above-mentioned countries are used as temporary student destinations from which they later migrate to more desirable destinations in the Global North (Mulvey, 2021; Tan & Hugo, 2017; Valenta & Garvik, 2023; Zijlstra, 2020). These contributions are closely related to a growing number of studies on transnational migration strategies and stepwise migrations (Paul & Yeoh, 2020, 2021; Tan & Hugo, 2017). Studies on stepwise migration have traditionally focused on labour migrations of people from the Global South (Carlos, 2013; Paul, 2011). However, several elements in this analytical framework, such as distinctions between country tiers and between affordable and desirable destination countries, may be applied in the analysis of student migrations (Valenta, 2022; Valenta & Garvik, 2023).

Studies on stepwise migrations distinguish between different categories of destinations based on their economy, wages, working conditions, migrant requirements, cost of migration and type of residence they provide (Paul & Yeoh, 2021; Valenta, 2022). According to these criteria, destination countries can be divided into several tiers (Paul, 2011; Zijlstra, 2020). In the lower tiers we find countries that are relatively easy to enter, but they do not provide stability and sufficient opportunities for long-term socioeconomic mobility and integration. In contrast, the top tier comprises wealthy developed countries, which provide such opportunities but pose high-level requirements according to migrants' skills (Paul, 2011; Paul & Yeoh, 2021). Following this logic, this tier system framework can also be fruitful for analysing international students' decisions and choices of various destination countries.

For example, it is assumed that the USA and Canada represent higher-tier destinations for African international students than Ukraine, South Africa, China and Morocco (Jagganath & Singh, 2021; Mulvey, 2021; Valenta, 2022). Still, the cost of migration to these countries can be higher regarding skills requirements, visas, entering and tuition fees (Börjesson, 2017; Mulvey, 2021; Valenta & Garvik, 2023). It is also important to acknowledge that it is not just economic realities and costs that affect young people's migratory decisions and aspirations.

In the following sections, we build on the presented research, contributing qualitative data on the migration experiences of West African international students. To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first studies that focus explicitly on stepwise migrations of this specific group of migrants (see also Mulvey, 2021).

2 | METHODOLOGY

Through the autumn of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, we conducted 21 qualitative in-depth interviews with students from Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Benin who have had various experiences

studying abroad. Seventeen of the international students were currently studying abroad at multiple destinations, and two informants had returned to their home country. In addition, two prospective interviews focused primarily on the students' future aspirations and decision-making processes. The students' ages ranged from 20 to 34 (most of them were in their late 20s or early 30s), and 12 males and 9 females participated in the research. The qualitative data sample consists of 13 informants from Ghana, 3 from Nigeria, 3 from Benin and 2 from Senegal. The core of the current research is based on their narratives from various stages of their multinational migration trajectories.

Studies on transnational migration encounter several methodological challenges regarding its complex, temporary and multispatial nature (Paul & Yeoh, 2020). Migration processes often last for many years and include residences in different countries (Valenta, 2022). Researchers exploring future, current and recurrent migrations must also discern various experiences and capture dynamic changes in migration decisions and contexts (Paul & Yeoh, 2020; Zijlstra, 2020). These challenges also had an impact on our interviewing and sampling procedures. Most of the interviews were conducted via Skype, Zoom and other digital platforms, which enabled us to reach informants in many countries and cope with the multispatiality. We also responded to the extended temporality and complexity by using strategic sampling to emphasise the features, dynamics and causes of the various migration trajectories of West African international students towards the Global North.

Most of our informants were recruited through informal networks of our research assistants and by utilising the snowball method, resulting in specific selectivity.⁹ However, throughout the entire study, we have focused on strategic sampling to achieve a heterogeneous sample, including students from both higher- and lower-income families, as well as female and male students of different ages and those in various stages of their migration trajectories. Most informants identified themselves as belonging to the low or high middle class, while only a few defined themselves as working class or lower. Our general impression is that such dominance is not coincidental but rather a result of broader socioeconomic inequalities that characterise countries in Western Africa, where higher education and international studies are usually inaccessible to the vast majority of the population (Jagganath & Singh, 2021; Mulvey, 2021).

In the early stages of our sampling, we conducted seven interviews with international students from West Africa studying in various countries. In the later phases of the research process, we used strategic sampling to focus more on the different stages of their migration processes and embrace the features, dynamics and causes of their decision-making. In the final stage of our sampling, we conducted eight interviews with West African international students who had extended study experience to look deeper into a retrospective lens. The aim was to examine whether they felt they

had succeeded with their migratory project and to capture their narratives in light of post-assessment.

As a result, our final sample includes people with different backgrounds at various stages of their migratory trajectories. Most of them were single, but a few were married, and some had children. All of these factors impacted the students' identities and motivations and influenced their migration trajectories. In sum, the informants' accounts provide various perspectives and migrant trajectories that capture the dynamics and drivers of multinational international student migrations from West African countries.

Although we have successfully managed the temporality and multispatiality challenges characterising our data sampling, we can identify some limitations. Biographical narratives of multiple migrations gathered before, after or in the middle of their migratory trajectories may be disproportionately affected by their current life situations. Such biases are especially likely to occur in retrospective perspectives on the migration process. The danger of remembering things differently or reworking the story afterwards is always present when informants convey their past experiences (Valenta, 2022). Nevertheless, their perceptions and thoughts will provide valuable insights for analysing different choices and strategies during various stages of their migration.

2.1 | Mapping the trajectories of West African international students

Migration studies have conceptualised multinational migration in various ways. Different concepts, such as onward, secondary, repeated, serial, stepwise, triangular and cross-wise migration, have been used to describe multiple international moves (Aydemir & Robinson, 2008; Ossman, 2004; Parrenas, 2021; Paul, 2011; Valenta & Garvik, 2023). These concepts have in common that they involve complex, dynamic and open-ended multinational trajectories. Our in-depth interviews with West African international students provided insight into their various migration trajectories, clearly illustrating the above-mentioned dimensions.

In Table 1, we outline the cases that illustrate the variations of migratory aspirations and migration patterns.

The different cases in the table can be categorised according to their migration trajectories. We can also distinguish between cases according to aspirations and the length of stay at the various destinations. In addition, we can sort them according to the phase the migrants were at in their migration process. Some of our informants were in the planning phase; they had decided to become international students and were exploring which opportunities existed for them. Although they had aspirations and desires, they had not yet chosen their final destination. They were unsure which factors to emphasise most and what advice to consider. Several informants had just started their migration careers and were trying to establish their identities as international students. Others had been international students for years and were more concerned with planning their next steps. Some informants had returned to their home countries when the interviews

⁹The majority of the interviewed students were from Ghana, as was our research assistant. We thank her for her valuable contribution to the project.

TABLE 1 Migration trajectories and plans of West African international students.^a

| International student | Age | Trajectory including years spent in the countries | Plans/dream destination |
|-----------------------------|-----|---|---------------------------------|
| Addae, Ghana | 29 | USA (8 months)–Ghana (26 years)–UK (1 year)–Ghana (1 year) | UK or Ghana |
| Evans, Ghana | 32 | China (4 years)–Germany (5 months)–Hong Kong SAR–(3 years) | Germany or Ghana |
| Dofi, Ghana | 30 | Netherlands (2 years) | Canada, USA or UK |
| Awusi, Ghana | 28 | Sweden (periods)–Poland (2 years) | Sweden or Ghana |
| Effia, Ghana | 29 | France (3 months)–Norway (2 years) | Work/study abroad |
| Chika, Nigeria | 24 | North-Cyprus (3 years)–Austria (1 year)–Nigeria (1 year)–Norway (2 years) | Germany or Switzerland |
| Abebi, Nigeria | 26 | Ghana (3 years)–Nigeria (1 year)–UK (2 years)–Nigeria (2 years) | Canada or USA |
| Amadi, Benin | 30 | USA (12 years)–Benin (13 years)–France (5 years) | Work abroad |
| Kofi, Ghana | 28 | France (4 years) | Ghana |
| Osakwe, Benin | 25 | USA (9 years)–Benin (14 years)–France (1 year) | Canada |
| Odion, Benin | 29 | Senegal (2 years)–Benin (2 years)–Netherlands (2 years) | Canada |
| Kwasi, Ghana | 28 | France (5 years) | France or Canada |
| Isaac, Ghana (Pro-spective) | 20 | | UK, Canada or USA |
| Zuhrah, Ghana, | 30 | Germany (5 months)–Ghana (8 years) | Canada |
| Tawiah, Ghana | 27 | France (2 years)–Ghana (1 year) | Canada |
| Haniah, Ghana | 29 | Germany (6 years) | Germany/Abroad |
| Bubune, Ghana | 30 | USA (2 years) | USA or Ghana |
| Serwa, Ghana (Pro-spective) | 23 | | Sweden, UK, USA or South-Africa |

TABLE 1 (Continued)

| International student | Age | Trajectory including years spent in the countries | Plans/dream destination |
|-----------------------|-----|--|-------------------------|
| Bako, Nigeria | 30 | Norway (1½ years) | Canada |
| Assane, Senegal | 34 | France (8 years)–Senegal (1 year)–Netherlands (3½ years) | Germany/Europe |
| Cheick, Senegal | 34 | France (11 years)–Netherlands (4 years) | Netherlands/Europe |

^aAll names are aliases; number in parathesis = years/months spent in the country. Several migrants in the study had taken holidays and short stays in their home country. Short stays are indicated in the table only if they were part of some migration strategy or structural forces. Migration strategies and the illustrative cases will be elaborated upon in more detail later in the paper.

were conducted; however, they were planning to move onward within a short time. Accordingly, it is expected that they will engage in serial or stepwise migrations at a later stage in their migration trajectories.

The literature on stepwise migrations distinguishes between descending and ascending stepwise migrations, as well as between indirect and direct stepwise migrations (Paul & Yeoh, 2021; Valenta, 2022). Upwards stepwise migrations refer to movements that bring migrants closer to top-tier countries in the Global North. In contrast, downward migrations are associated with onward mobility from top-tier destinations to lower-tier countries. Both types of movements can occur directly or indirectly, with temporary intermediary returns to the home country, which, as indicated in the table, was a prevalent trend among students in our study.

Some students migrated to developed countries, which was followed by several onward movements in the top tier countries, only interrupted by short temporary returns to the home country. For example, Evans had to clime onwards, advancing gradually to higher-tier countries. He first lived in China, then had an exchange in Germany, and is now staying in Hong Kong but planning to move onward to Germany. Chika moved first from Ghana to North Cyprus, onwards to Austria, back home to Nigeria and then onwards to Norway.

The trajectories from lower- to higher-tier destination countries in the Global North were relatively smooth for some informants. In these cases, the international students achieved permanent residence in countries in top-tier countries after a few migratory steps. However, some trajectories also included several steps between and within the country tiers comprising different statuses and permits, temporary returns to their home country, descending stepwise migrations, and various struggles related to restrictive migration regimes in the destination countries.

In the following sections, we analyse the observed patterns of multinational migration in more depth. We will build on previous

research and explore migration drivers and students' motivations at the stages as mentioned above of their migration trajectories, both in West Africa and in the receiving countries. Further, we will relate these migration drivers and motivations to students' resources, obligations and strategies.

2.2 | International student migration as social mobility and the family class-making project

Studies of serial and stepwise migration have in common that they shift the traditionally singular focus on the process of migration, integration or return towards an investigation of each stage as a co-constitutive step in the migration cycle (Ossman, 2004; Parreñas et al., 2019; Paul & Yeoh, 2021; Valenta, 2022; Valenta & Garvik, 2023). It seems that for several of our informants, initial preparations for future migration trajectories began already in their early childhood, with education perceived as a crucial factor for social mobility and class-making projects. Studying abroad was here perceived as an intrinsic part of these endeavours. Accordingly, we must broaden the perspective of the West African students' multinational migrations in terms of time and space and consider their onward migrations and lifetime mobility aspirations (King & Raghuram, 2013; Mulvey, 2021; Tan and Hugo, 2017; Xu, 2023).

Class-making projects are central to Africans' migratory trajectories inside and outside Africa (Coe & Pauli, 2020; Mulvey & Mason, 2022; Xu, 2023). Such projects were also relevant to the informants in our study, where academic careers are not only associated with social mobility but also closely interconnected with geographical mobility. Studying abroad seemed to be a strategy for maintaining or enhancing the family's existing class status and enabling upward social mobility. For example, several students pointed out that their parents were very concerned about the destination of their schooling. Indeed, some of them had already, at an early stage of their children's academic careers, planned where they would study. As Assane pointed out:

It was my father's decision. I wanted to stay in Senegal, but he thought I would have a more solid education as well as more opportunities and better learning conditions in France. It's like moving from one world to another world that has many more advantages. (Assane (34), Senegal)

It would be overly simplistic to view emigration from the Global South and international student migration to the Global North as isolated individual endeavours (Waters, 2005, 2015). As Xu (2023) points out, international student migrations should rather be seen as a means of students' and families' social (re)production. Most students in the study classified themselves as falling within the middle class. Nonetheless, their accounts show that their families had limited resources, and international studies placed them under considerable pressure. These constraints resulted in equivalent

migration experiences, which may be associated with those of middling migrants facing various hardships and drawbacks while moving between countries (Wee & Yeoh, 2021). Several students shared how they were navigating complex legal, financial and administrative processes at each destination. They needed to obtain and renew different types of visas, comply with migration regulations, and face obstacles in integrating into the social fabric of the host country. These challenges added complexity and uncertainty to their migration trajectories.

As we will soon see, students limited resources and the above-mentioned expectations perpetuated and motivated their stepwise migrations, either directly or indirectly. On the one hand, the different types of family resources students had in their country of origin impacted their lives in their destination country. For example, they affected their ability to study full-time and whether they had to work alongside their studies to provide funding. On the other hand, family investments created expectations for students and dilemmas regarding whether to stay, return or move onward.

2.3 | Facilitators and constraints for migrations of West African international students

The dynamics of students' migrations in the current study can be related to various coercive and enabling forces which may occur in different forms. However, they are usually integrated into the institutional, legal and political frameworks of destination countries (de Haas, 2021; Sen, 1998). Strict migration policies and visa requirements make it difficult for people from the African continent to gain legal access to the Global North (Berriane, 2015; Van Hear, 2014). Nevertheless, development efforts and the global education industry may provide such opportunities for Africans who become international students (Hulme et al., 2014).

Accordingly, the presence of the above-mentioned facilitating factors helped alleviate the challenges posed by strict migration policies for the students. Scholarships, for instance, played a pivotal role as financial facilitators, effectively easing the economic challenges associated with international education. Simultaneously, they served as potent motivators, inspiring students to embark on educational pursuits abroad. In essence, the complex interplay between strict migration policies, facilitator factors, and motivations created a nuanced landscape where external challenges were met with enabling mechanisms. The motivations of the students to pursue international education persisted despite barriers, and facilitator factors became instrumental in turning these aspirations into tangible opportunities.

The narratives of our informants align with previous studies showing that these opportunities are also embedded in wider structural frames, such as historical connections between their countries and the student destinations in the Global North. Here, colonial ties were an essential factor for many of the informants in our study. The colonial ties between Senegal, Benin and their former colonial power, France, were especially apparent. For example, in the

case of Assane, studying in France was considered the only viable option for him if he wanted to study abroad. As he pointed out:

Senegal is a former colony of France, so they give a lot of visas to Senegalese students. It's much easier to go to France than to the UK or the Netherlands, which can be very difficult if you are from Senegal. (Assane (34), Senegal)

Some of the informants went to Catholic schools or even French high schools in their home countries, which meant they were already familiar with the French education system before arriving in France as international students. They described the tight relationship with France as a great advantage for them in their further education career, both because of the language and French culture. However, it seems that initial opportunities for studying abroad that were provided by the above-mentioned colonial links were often used as an intermediary entering step to top-tier countries, followed by onward stepwise migrations. For example, students from Benin and Senegal, like Assane, Cheick and Osakwe, first studied in France, while later building on savings from part-time jobs in France, family support and acquired human capital and credentials from France, they aspired to other countries in Western Europe or North America.¹⁰

Colonial ties also impacted informants from Ghana and Nigeria, but more in terms of shared language with former colonial masters and transnational networks that linked them to potential student destinations in the Global North. For others, religious associations and scholarships were more prominent factors that stimulated them or helped them to study abroad. Haniah from Ghana and Odion from Benin applied for scholarships through their religious organisations. Such scholarships often also provide guidelines for appropriate destinations. Haniah considered Canada, Australia, Austria and New Zealand but went to Germany.

So, one day, we were having a discussion, and a friend came up to me and was like, 'you're a Catholic. You know there is a scholarship for Catholics. You should give it a try.' That's why I came to Germany. (Haniah (29), Ghana)

Odion had Canada as his first choice. Still, due to the restrictions of the scholarship criteria, he ended up in the Netherlands.

One of the criteria for the scholarship is to secure admission to a top-ranking university in the world. I wanted to go to Canada, but the university I selected was not a part of the Islamic Development Bank's list, so they did not accept that. (Odion (29), Benin)

It is acknowledged that the international study experiences may influence students' trajectories. However, our general impression is that other factors and concerns took precedence in shaping the migration trajectories of students in our study. Here, factors such as tuition level and accessibility to visas and residence permits substantially impacted the student's choice of study destination. Awusi, for example, was looking for a place with a low cost of living and cheap tuition, which would be affordable for her godmother, so she went to Poland.

Having spent years abroad before becoming an international student also seemed to provide important information that enabled a deeper understanding of further assessments and choices. We have mentioned earlier that educational choices and families' investments in education from early childhood have influenced the migratory opportunities of students in the study. We may add that migratory experiences before becoming students also impact the students' choices and aspirations regarding onward migrations. Some informants lived abroad for parts of their childhood, and these years abroad impacted their aspirations and worldviews. Awusi, for example, had lived with her godmother in Sweden for several periods as a child. At the time of the interview, she was studying in Poland, but her childhood experiences have made her see Sweden as her dream destination and where she hoped to resettle in the future.

2.4 | Return and remigration: migration divers and students' motivations

Recent studies on the mobility patterns of African international students challenge the simplicity of a stay-and-return binary view on student mobility, pointing out that many students also migrate onwards to third countries (Jagganath & Singh, 2021; Mulvey, 2021; Mulvey & Mason, 2022). Mulvey (2021) relates these variations in students' trajectories to their social backgrounds and international mobility regimes that enable and restrict the migration of different categories of international students. According to him, mobility regimes 'serve to mediate the agency of African student migrants' (Mulvey, 2021, pp. 416).

It is implied in the above-mentioned studies that African international students with middle-class backgrounds are in a better position to deal with constraining forces embedded in strict mobility regimes. This resonates with our study, but with certain modifications. Most students in our study also returned to their home country after studying in their first destinations. As already mentioned, most students in our study had middle-class backgrounds. However, closer scrutiny of this group shows that middle-class students also had to struggle with various coercive forces at this particular stage of their trajectories.

Sometimes, the returns were indeed unproblematic, and several informants considered moving back to their home country after completing their studies. Nevertheless, there was usually a certain ambivalence associated with their assessments of whether to continue searching for opportunities abroad or return permanently.

¹⁰Motivations for these onward migrations will be discussed later in the paper.

Some informants had worked for a long time in their home country to save enough money to study abroad, and family and other networks were often involved in raising the required capital. When a student finally went abroad, sometimes the family and friends in their home country thought the student would have an increased opportunity to send money home. Furthermore, when these migrants returned home for vacation or were compelled to return, their community might experience disappointment upon realising that their economic status did not align with initial expectations of wealth. This mismatch between the family's and community's expectations and the student's ability to meet their demands created significant pressure. At this point, we should also note that most international students in our study had limited pathways to obtain permanent residency in their study destinations abroad (to be discussed in more detail in the next section). There were few possibilities for visa renewal or the conversion of student status to labour migrant status or other statuses. In such situations, students were compelled to grapple with the challenges of onward mobility by seeking new scholarships, additional education or employment opportunities across multiple countries (see also Coe & Pauli, 2020; Mulvey & Mason, 2022).

Some students had genuine plans to return permanently but were disappointed by the situation in the country and decided to re-migrate. Others planned to move onward from their student destination countries but failed to move directly to third countries, so they had to return home for a certain period of time. Some of these temporary returns were not intended; instead, they were coerced into returning home due to visa problems, lack of job opportunities, and residence permits. Such forced returns, or fear of them, felt problematic for several of our informants. For example, Tawiah, who had to return to Ghana from France, felt boxed up in Ghana, like there was a glass ceiling over her head. Other students also described the conditions within their country as unsustainable, forcing them to go abroad or re-migrate if they did have to return. Osakwe contextualised his motivation for re-emigration in this way:

First of all, when you see the unemployment rate in my country, or even other West African countries, you see that it's really high. And you understand that people are going to school every day, getting their diplomas finishing university, and some people even have PhDs but are forced to be taxi and motorcycle drivers. (Osakwe (25), Benin)

These coercive forces within West Africa may explain the emergence of the so-called 'Jakpa (escape) sentiments' which several of our informants referred to while discussing their motivations to re-migrate. They described the Jakpa attitude as a sort of revolt against unsustainable conditions in their home country. The tagline describes the need for people to escape from Nigeria or other West African countries to seek better conditions in the Global North. The students also mentioned the Jakpa to express eagerness for remigration or onward migration as a more preferable option to returning or staying in the home country. As Chika conveyed:

Jakpa is a huge thing in Nigeria. It has been the favourite line for Nigerians for the past four years. When you go abroad, you have people calling or texting you to say, 'Oh, you don jakpa'. It is assumed you have gone to the better world. (Chika (24), Nigeria)

Chika is committed to Jakpa despite several drawbacks. She had completed her first degree in North Cyprus and moved onwards for master's studies in Austria. However, due to visa troubles, she moved back to Nigeria, where she had to work while looking for other options to study abroad. After some time, she got the opportunity to pursue her master's degree in Norway. In her case, as well as in the other cases we introduced above, the opportunity to re-migrate was enhanced by students' academic capital, skills and savings from part-time jobs that students acquired in their previous study destination. Chika planned to build on these resources and resettle in Germany or Switzerland after graduation in Norway.

2.5 | Drivers and motivations for multinational migrations within top-tier destinations

The cases presented above convey why students migrated in the first place and why they usually returned home before re-migrating. We have also seen what motivated them to migrate again. Odion from Benin studied first in Senegal and later, building on his education, got an international student visa in the Netherlands, while Abebi from Nigeria moved first to Ghana and later to the UK. Motivations and drivers of such upwards stepwise migration between different country-tiers were expected to bring significant improvements in their life circumstances.

West African international student's multiple migrations reflect the interplay of migrant regimes and migrant subjectivities (Collins, 2020, 2021). The students' aspirations and decisions could also be understood in terms of emerging intentionality, reflecting the process of learning to migrate that emerge through the experience of crossing borders, living in culturally unfamiliar contexts and being exposed to various conceptualisations of the world (Findlay et al., 2017; Paul & Yeoh, 2021).

The experiences of West African students also underscore the enduring disparity between the Global South and the Global North, highlighting the prevailing power dynamics that shaped their interactions. These mechanisms played a pivotal role in shaping the perception of destinations that students found most attractive. The diverse experiences accumulated before and during migration laid the foundation for a nuanced country-tier system that students navigated. Yet, the prevailing general image was that countries in the Global North provided them with better opportunities. As Assane previously pointed out by saying, 'It was like moving from one world to another world that had many more advantages'. However, we have seen that migrating onwards to the Global North may just be the beginning of a more complex multinational trajectory.

It should be noted that these tier systems were not exclusively based on economic prosperity but integrated various qualitative indicators, including openness, stability and social well-being. Therefore, it is also important to clarify in more detail the drivers and motivations for students' multinational migrations between top-tier destinations in the Global North. Previous research on students from other parts of the Global South reminds us that the students not only aspire to gain a better education through international studies but also seek permanent residence in higher-tier countries (Luthra & Platt, 2016; Tan & Hugo, 2017; Valenta & Garvik, 2023). However, it is also evident that countries in the Global North have different policies in this regard. Some countries facilitate two-step migration, while others have a more restrictive stance regarding transitioning to permanent resident status (Börjesson, 2017; Mulvey, 2021; Riaño et al., 2018). We found similar aspirations among international students in our study. However, students who tried to change their status after graduation often experienced difficulties finding an employer willing to sponsor working visas or continue their academic careers in the same destination country. For example, Abebi from Nigeria pursued her master's degree in Bristol, UK, and had planned to complete her master's, work a few years in the UK, and then apply for a PhD. However, after completing her master's degree, she had difficulty finding a job and eventually returned to Nigeria. Like others who have had to return to their home country, Abebi planned to re-migrate to Canada.

The students' strategies align with previous research on multinational migrations, illustrating that coercive forces in receiving countries may trigger subsequent remigration, often to other destination countries (Caron, 2020; Mulvey & Mason, 2022; Schapendonk et al., 2020; Valenta, 2022). The changes in the destination country within the Global North resulted from lacking opportunities to re-migrate to the same destinations. Students were therefore compelled to apply for student or high-skilled migrant visas in various countries and eventually migrated to countries where they obtained visas, scholarships, or employment. Some ended up in countries that were not their first choice, but still moved when the migration opportunity emerged to avoid prolonged breaks in their professional, academic, and mobility projects.

At this point, it is important to stress that the direction of remigration was affected not only by the constraints mentioned above but also by negative experiences with previous destinations. In our data, we can discern two significant experiences that motivated students to strategically aspire towards new destinations. The first one seemed related to the difficulties with residence status and the prospect of gaining permanent residence in their former destination countries. Therefore, many decided to avoid previous destinations and instead aspired to move to destinations in the Global North, such as Canada, which they believed provided better avenues for permanent residence. Another reason that appeared to motivate relocations within the Global North was related to students' experiences of racism. Many of our informants were more aware of their skin color or 'African identity' upon re-migrating. Driven by the prejudice they faced in their current or past locations and since a

permanent return to their home country was not a feasible option, at least not in the foreseeable future, they decided to either relocate or planned to do so within the Global North. Their primary aspiration was to escape from the xenophobia and racism they had experienced.

For instance, Osakwe from Benin had lived in the USA for 9 years while his father studied and worked there. After many years of living in Benin, Osakwe wanted to go abroad again. However, due to his family's negative experiences, he avoided considering the USA as a destination option. Similarly, Cheick from Senegal moved from France to the Netherlands due to stigmatisation and racism in France. She believed that the Netherlands would be a better destination in this regard. Others, like Osakwe, Odion, and Tawiah, were planning to move to Canada, partly because they imagined that people would be more open-minded, and where they believed their chances of social acceptance would be higher. It remains uncertain whether these aspirations and yearnings will be fulfilled. Nonetheless, they serve as a reminder that stepwise migrations are not solely motivated by economic factors. Broader aspirations also drive them as students seek viable improvements in their life circumstances, considering their general impression of different receiving countries and concerns regarding discrimination, stability, and integration opportunities (Kölbel, 2020; Ossman, 2004; Wee & Yeoh, 2021).

3 | CONCLUSION

The global share of international students from West Africa has increased significantly in recent years. This study maintains that academic aspirations do not solely drive this form of international mobility. It is argued that education and migration are combined to (re)produce the class position of African student migrants and their families (Mulvey, 2021; Mulvey & Mason, 2022; Xu, 2023). We add to the current debates on African student migrations emphasising that these projects may involve complex multinational trajectories.

Our findings strengthened the argument put forth in a growing number of studies that migrations of international students from the Global South should go beyond a stay-return framework (Mulvey, 2021; Hawthorne, 2014; Tan & Hugo, 2017). Indeed, the narratives of the West African international students clearly suggest that we should broaden the perspective in terms of both time and space. In addition to considering students' short-term educational aspirations and two-step migration pathways, we should also take into account their onward migrations and lifetime mobility aspirations (Mulvey, 2021; Tan & Hugo 2017; Xu, 2023).

Many restrictive legal visa policies in the Global North target people from the African continent, so becoming an international student can open legal opportunities and access to higher-tier countries that are otherwise difficult to enter. However, to fulfil their mobility projects, African students often have to engage in complex stepwise migrations and face various struggles and drawbacks. This study has demonstrated that African students from middle-class backgrounds are not exempt from these struggles. Their experiences

are still more closely aligned with those of middling migrants rather than middle-class students from wealthy parts of the world. While they may be in a better position than many of their compatriots, they are not a hypermobile elite (Valenta & Garvik, 2023).

In this article, we have explored the students' experiences and mapped their migratory trajectories. We have argued that West African international student migration is driven and affected by their socioeconomic and academic aspirations, as well as coercive forces in both the countries abroad and within their home countries. It is maintained that opportunities to study abroad can emerge through family support, social networks, scholarships, and colonial or religious ties, while coercive forces are expressed through family expectations, challenging visa policies, expired resident permits, or lack of further study or job opportunities in both home countries and destination countries. Additionally, xenophobia and racism appear to impact the students' migratory trajectories, motivating them to move onwards.

This study supports the argument that international student migrations from the Global South to the Global North are long-term intergenerational family investments, and it adds the West African experience to the debate on transnational family strategies and education (Waters, 2005, 2015). Our findings clearly show how the West African international student's migrations were collaborative mobility projects aimed at improving the students and their families' life circumstances. We have explored how West African students and their families engage in this process, which gradually leads to various stepwise migrations. The preparatory step in the students' migration trajectory often began with a focus on schooling and investments in education from early childhood. Furthermore, the students' initial destinations were typically countries that were relatively easy to enter due to either historical connections or affordability. However, these countries often did not offer viable integration, stability, and social mobility opportunities. The students' narratives have also demonstrated how they later gathered experiences and resources to migrate further, utilising multiple migrations to improve their life circumstances. The West African international students we interviewed were at various stages of their migration towards the Global North. Some had managed to climb higher within the hierarchy of their receiving countries, while others were planning to do so.

In some cases, their stepwise migrations were straightforward, while in others, their trajectories involved hardships, failed or postponed plans, or even forced returns. Nevertheless, the West African students persisted in their long-term migrations and resettlement aspirations toward desired Global North countries, demonstrating their unwavering commitment.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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