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The Case of International Student Enrollment and Ethnic Migration to Kosovo: Examining the Geography of Academic Outcomes

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ABSTRACT: *Approximately 8% of students in the Republic of Kosovo's public universities' bachelor's-level study programs are international students. As a young nation (Kosovo declared independence in 2008) and one with weak higher education coordination, domestic and international accreditation challenges, and persistent political influence in university affairs, these structural conditions do not necessarily inspire international student enrollment. Nevertheless, with a consistent flow of international students entering programs in Kosovo, we ask: What are the characteristics of international students who are enrolling in Kosovo's public universities? And, how do Kosovo's international students fare*

academically? – Is their relative success shaped by their country of origin? Using a longitudinal sample of 69,867 students starting from 2012 (the earliest available data on Kosovo’s public higher education following adoption of the Law on Higher Education in 2011), we describe patterns of international students and use blocked logistic regression to model their success and relative failure.

Keywords: emerging economies, ethnic migration, higher education, international student enrollment, Kosovo

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INTRODUCTION

Student mobility into the Republic of Kosovo provides a novel context to evaluate patterns of international student enrollment both conceptually and practically. Foundationally, Kosovo, Europe’s youngest democracy having declared independence in 2008 and being comprised of a majority of citizens under age 35 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024), is a country in early-stage economic and emerging democratic development. Its higher education institutions experience persistent educational quality and accreditation challenges, and the nation has a comparatively weaker economy in the region and continent (Barnhardt, et al., 2022) along with the region’s lowest standard of living and the highest unemployment rate in Europe, especially for youth (Osblid & Bartlett, 2019).

Typically, student mobility is conceptualized as being mediated by push-pull dynamics, which denote the comparative imbalances and/or differences in educational quality and economic conditions (although not exclusive to these characteristics) between the sending and destination countries (Beine, Noel, & Ragot, 2014). Specifically, *push* factors emanate from the conditions of a student’s home country that tend to encourage a student to enroll elsewhere in the hopes of seeking greater educational, economic, or cultural advantage by studying there (Beine, Noel, & Ragot, 2014; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Conversely, the destination country *pulls* students on account of institutional prestige/quality, the ability to work in the destination country (Mazzarol & Soutar), or social reasons

such as safety, shared cultural practices, or bilateral political agreements (Boyaci & Oz, 2019).

Critically, the prevailing push-pull conceptualization of student mobility to Kosovo defies existing theory. Simply stated – students from outside Kosovo are most likely coming from countries with better higher education systems, economies, and political stability, and yet they choose Kosovo, where education quality is weak, job prospects are poor, and corruption persists. Current push-pull theory does not adequately capture the potential for inward educational migration to Kosovo. As such, evaluating student mobility patterns regarding Kosovo holds the potential to understand the phenomenon for the nation while also contributing to expanding the field's understanding of factors that shape educational mobility and migration.

Prefaced in theories of migration, prior scholarship has documented an acute brain drain problem in Kosovo, where educated youth tend to emigrate to more stable economies with higher living standards in Western Europe (Nimani & Nimani, 2024). Correspondingly, in recent years, Kosovo, not unlike some other developing countries (see Wei, 2013), has implemented repatriation programs. To date, these programs have targeted professionals (Government of Kosovo, 2024; Office of the Prime Minister, 2024) or people possessing or seeking graduate degrees (KAEF, n.d.; Olluri & Rexhaj, 2025), rather than focusing on the role that bachelor's-level programs could play in reverse migration or repatriation. Gashi and Adnett's (2015) study of recent returning migrants to Kosovo revealed that one's education level can positively influence one's ultimate return migration intentions. Their finding aligns with Tokas et al.'s (2023) assertion that international student mobility can indeed play a role in the phenomenon of international and return migration. Knowing that education has a distinctive role in the migration phenomenon, international student enrollment in bachelor's-level programs could be a factor in repatriation, but it is essential that Kosovo understand who is enrolling, from where and whether these enrollees have a prior affiliation with Kosovo.

To date, no prior studies have examined international student enrollment in Kosovo, which creates a gap in terms of understanding mobility to Kosovo conceptually and practically. Correspondingly, understanding student mobility to Kosovo is constrained without further examination. Moreover, we sought to explore these matters by asking two research questions – one descriptive and one analytical: (1) What are the characteristics of the international students who are enrolling in Kosovo's public universities? Crucially, (2) How do international students in Kosovo fare academically, and after examining academic outcomes, is their relative academic success associated with the characteristics of their country of origin? In asking these two questions, we seek to (a) contribute to the literature on early-stage economic and emerging democratic developing countries that are unlikely destinations in the conventional push-pull conceptualization and (b) provide potential insights into factors that may induce academically successful students to come to Kosovo, which could have practical implications for devising brain gain strategies based on bachelor's level international student enrollment. Both foci – mobility to emerging democracies and academic outcomes of

internationally mobile students – are gaps in existing theory and literature (Luo, et al., 2023; Roy, et al., 2019)

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE

We ground our study in a conceptual framework regarding international student mobility that frames student mobility in terms of “push” and “pull” factors – the conditions in the students’ sending country, in the destination country, and the students’ personal characteristics (Beine, Noel, & Ragot, 2014; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In the following paragraphs, we consider the characteristics of Kosovo public higher education that align with this conceptual framing, as well as contextual factors that may contribute to dynamics that are less well aligned with existing theory.

Among the driving *push* dynamics of student mobility, quality in higher education has long stood out as a critical external factor or environmental pressure (Lee & Stewart, 2002) for students in selecting a destination country (Beine, Noel, & Ragot, 2014; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). That is, students choose to leave home for a better education outside their home country. As such, it is important to contextualize the quality contexts of Kosovo higher education.

Public higher education in Kosovo is approximately 75 years old. The University of Prishtina “Hasan Prishtina,” founded in the early 1970s (Hetemi, 2020), offers studies across 14 faculties, is the nation’s flagship research university, and enrolls the majority of all students in public higher education. In roughly the last decade, Kosovo public higher education has expanded regionally with five additional public institutions, all of which teach primarily in the Albanian language, and some offer specific programs in other languages (particularly the University of Prizren “Ukshin Hoti”, which has multilingual study programs). Generally, Kosovo’s public universities have a slight quality advantage over private universities (Baliqi, 2010). Uniquely, however, among the small handful of universities in the world where the primary language of instruction is Albanian, Kosovo’s largest institution, the University of Prishtina, holds the highest international quality ranking (Cybermetrics Lab, 2025; Quacquarelli Symonds, 2022; Times Higher Education, 2025).

While ranked highly among the Albanian language universities, Kosovo’s higher education sector suffers from quality and accreditation issues on multiple dimensions. Kosovo higher education has teetered between being included and expelled from the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) (Koha.net, 2025), with EQAR being an international marker of credibility that a country’s accreditation is in compliance with the Bologna Process Standards and Guidelines for the EHEA. Kosovo’s public higher education institutions are also subject to political interference (Baliu, 2019), one of the rationales for their dismissal from ENQA. Furthermore, critiques of Kosovo higher education are abundant with decries that the curriculum is stale and out of sync with labor market needs (Barnhardt, et al., in press), claims that the academic integrity of scholarly work is suspect (Council of Europe, 2017; ORCA, 2021),

and that universities cannot keep up with modern higher education technologies such as securing and maintaining access to electronic libraries (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2018). These shifts in accreditation and barriers to quality in Kosovo higher education mean that the portability and value of students' degrees are precarious and often change even while they are enrolled. In fact, prototypically, these adverse quality issues would typically be construed as push factors prompting Kosovo nationals to seek education outside their country.¹

Furthermore, regarding aspects of educational quality, there is low efficiency in Kosovo public higher education, with an average completion rate of 22 percent (Barnhardt et al., 2022), the lowest in the region, which stands in stark contrast to the Western Balkans rate of 46 percent (Gashi & Bartlett, 2016). Part of the complication is that Kosovo is overenrolled, with over 2,000 enrollments for every 100,000 people - the highest ratio in the region - which Gashi and Bartlett (2016) interpret as a potential consequence of the adverse labor market conditions in Kosovo, which prompt local students to enroll in higher education as an alternative to unemployment. Globally, with completion rates understood as a clear indicator of educational effectiveness (Eurydice, 2015), Kosovo is the least effective system in the Western Balkans and is less effective than even the lowest nations in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) - Hungary with 48% - and more than 20 percentage points below the OECD average completion rate of 68% (Gashi & Bartlett). Moreover, with the array of quality issues, it would logically suggest that students would be deterred from choosing Kosovo as a destination country.

Prior scholarship suggests that an important external factor that can *pull* students to a particular destination country is relative affordability (Lee & Stewart, 2022; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), something Kosovo indeed has. With respect to costs, tuition and fees for higher education in Kosovo are quite low (Kodirolli & Hoxha, 2019). The value of educational affordability is paramount in Kosovo, so much so that in 2021, public higher education became free for domestic students (MESTI, 2021). Typically, fees for foreign students are low compared to other nations. Costs are determined by individual public institutions and vary from no charge up to €2,500 per academic year. The costs of living for university students in Kosovo are among the most affordable in all of Europe and range between €25- €400 depending on where one lives - on-campus, in an apartment, or commutes from a permanent residence near campus (Kodirolli & Hoxha, 2019).

Clearly, Kosovo's relative challenges with educational quality and limited economic opportunities, along with its postconflict and developing national contexts, suggest that it would be an unlikely destination for international students. The literature consistently links educational quality and economic opportunities as strong positive influences on students' choice of a destination country (Abbott & Silles, 2015), meaning that the destination country has both higher educational quality and greater economic prosperity than one's home country. Similarly, the common pattern of mobility is for students to move from developing countries to developed countries (Thissen & Ederveen, 2006), with higher per capita GDP specifically exhibiting a strong positive relationship to

students' choice of destination country (Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). Comparatively, in the region and continent, all these scenarios are likely *not* the criteria for one choosing Kosovo – unless the student's choice set is framed in terms of choosing quality among the options of all Albanian language universities. Beine et al. (2014) observe that higher rankings positively influence mobility to a destination country. In the Kosovo case, if a student's choice set of destination countries are the three nations with Albanian language universities (Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia), Kosovo is home to the highest globally ranked Albanian language university.ⁱⁱ

Other streams of work in the student mobility literature give rise to other possible explanations for why Kosovo may emerge as a destination of enrollment for international students. Certainly, as noted, the cost savings in Kosovo may act as a potential pull positively influencing its choice as a destination country. Alternately, Finn (2017) frames destination country choice as an emotional act beyond economic and quality rationales. Drawing on Mason's (2004) conceptualization, Finn (2017) describes mobility choices as “deeply and complexly embedded within webs of relationships that may be enriching and sustaining or equally, difficult and destructive” (p. 745). The emotional aspect may be tied to familial, reverse migration, or social connections. Hazen and Alberts (2004) suggest that the location of students' destination choices can indeed reflect migration intentions or postgraduation aspirations for settlement. It is possible that Kosovo could be an emotional draw for international students choosing to study there.

Since the 1960s, there have been four waves of outbound migration, resulting in the formation of large Kosovan diaspora communities in Germany and Switzerland, as well as in nearby countries beyond the former Yugoslav borders (Veljanovska Blazhevskaja, 2017). During the 1999 war in Kosovo, migration continued to several places within the Western Balkans, around Western Europe and to the U.S. Recently, outbound migration has mostly been to Western Europe (Veljanovska Blazhevskaja), with many choosing to return after the war. With the wave of some returning after the war (Veljanovska Blazhevskaja), there is a chance that strong social ties exist between diaspora college-bound youth and Kosovars who returned in prior years. Correspondingly, social and emotional ties may encourage pipelines for participating in Kosovo's educational system.

The deep emotional ties that Finn (2017) notes as a pull or motivation for students to pursue a particular destination country can be based on the strength of the cultural connection between the student and the destination location (Beech, 2014). Kosovo's culture is distinctive. Of its two-million-person population, 92% are Albanian and 93% are Muslim (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2024). While majority Muslim, Kosovo uniquely trends toward secularism and tends to identify with the multicultural spirit of Europe, despite it not being a European Union (EU) member or candidate country. In essence, Kosovo is slightly novel in that it retains its long history and tradition of ethnic and religious identity. However, it has adopted contemporary European practices such as using the Euro as its form of currency (Central Bank of Kosovo, 2024) – Kosovo being only one of two of the six Western Balkan nations that have done so, and there is widespread English

fluency among the younger generations (Sejdiu, Ramadani & Ninaj, 2024) because English is the lingua franca and the official language of the EU and is a compulsory subject in Kosovo schools (MEST, 2011). Therefore, culturally, it is convenient and easy to communicate in Kosovo with English and to be exposed to its traditional Albanian and Serbian languages (the official languages for signs and documents, Republic of Kosovo, 2008).

In sum, Kosovo is a rather multiethnic, multilingual, and at times pluralistic society. This is in part due to the international influence and presence of the United Nations engaging in direct governance during Kosovo's interim period from 1999-2008 following the 1999 war and NATO intervention (Brosig, 2011). Similarly, Kosovo is welcoming to visitors and maintains a robust international community due to the ongoing activities of the EU, the World Bank, and donor nations such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, the USA, Luxembourg, Sweden, and Switzerland, who began by supporting humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in 1999 (Bartlett, et al., 2015). These donor nations remain in Kosovo and have evolved to work in areas such as economic development, civil society, education, and the arts (Venner, 2012), which have had an influence on these sectors and continue to contribute to the international spirit that is part of contemporary Kosovo culture.

With Kosovo's distinctive culture, it is important to understand where international students are enrolled and how well they are performing academically. By examining these patterns, we can make sense of what type of student talent (Brooks & Waters, 2021) is attracted to Kosovo, which holds promise for understanding educational migration dynamics and international enrollment patterns in emerging economic and democratic states.

METHODS

Our longitudinal sample consists of 69,867 Kosovo students who enrolled in a first-cycle bachelor's program at public universities starting in 2012 and subsequent students' patterns of enrollment for 7 years through 2019. These data are the first available after independence and the adoption of Kosovo's Law on Higher Education, which passed in 2011. Secondary data were retrieved from the student records management system for public universities in Kosovo. These data are administered by technical personnel at the University of Prishtina (UP), the nation's largest, flagship university. UP provided deidentified access to the data. The student records data are the most consistent, high-quality student-level data in the nation and are complete because the system requires data capture for all cases for any variable. As such, there are no missing data in this data set (and analysis) since the system only captures variables for which all cases have a value.

Outcome Variables

We use two academic outcome measures, whether students "passed any end-of-course exams" in a given semester and another that indicates whether a student failed and had to repeat their first-year study program curricula. These two

variables are proxies for academic success and failure over time. Transcript data are not captured in real-time, longitudinally, alongside semesterly enrollments in the student records system. Only passing grades are recorded once a student has passed a course due to regulations that permitted students to fail exams up to three times. The outcomes were the best measures of academic outcomes available.

Independent Variables

Independent variables controlled for sex, ethnicity, academic discipline, and year fixed effects. Our predictor variables included a variable for international status—which we categorized in a particular manner that reflects the nuances of Kosovo. Those students who identified a Kosovo municipality as their place of residence and identified Kosovo as their home country were coded as “Kosovar.” Those who identified Kosovo as their home country but did not identify a Kosovo municipality as their place of residence were coded as “nonresident Kosovar.” Finally, those who did not identify either were coded as “international.” Additional predictor variables included characteristics of a student’s primary resident country, denoting geographic variation according to one’s home country in proximity to the Western Balkans, the political variation of one’s nation according to EU status (member, candidate member, potential candidate), and the country’s PISA level score as a measure of preuniversity educational quality in one’s home country.

Analyses

First, we performed a one-way ANOVA to compare the relationship of international status with personal characteristics, thereby answering our first research question regarding who enrolls.

Next, before determining our final models, we explored the potential for collinearity and performed robustness checks. There was some potential for collinearity between the EU status variable and international student status after reviewing the variance inflation factor (VIF) score. Correspondingly, we estimated our regression models as three alternative models that included (1) both variables, (2) only the international student variable, and (3) only the EU variable. Overall, the findings were quite consistent across these three approaches, with the only notable difference being that international student status became a significant predictor when the EU variable was excluded. Given these checks and the utility of maintaining the EU variable for its interpretive value, we retained the EU status and international status variables in the models.

For robustness, we ran all the models applying Huber–White (sandwich) robust standard errors. When comparing estimates with and without robust standard errors, the results were almost identical, with only a slight difference in standard errors. Even so, these differences were negligible given the large sample size.

Following these checks on the data, we generated a series of logistic regressions to answer research question two regarding the relative success of

Kosovo’s international students. We also explored the possibility of interaction effects but did not observe significant findings for the interaction terms, so we excluded these from the final models. Logistic regression findings are presented in terms of odds ratios (ORs). A value greater than 1 reflects a greater chance of the outcome occurring; values less than 1 represent a decline in the odds of the outcome occurring.

FINDINGS

Figure 1 reveals that students come from around the globe, including students from North America, Australia, northern Africa, and Europe. The most frequent countries of origin are in Europe and reflect Kosovar out-migration patterns, with Germany and Serbia having the most students enrolled in Kosovo universities.

Most Frequent Countries of Origin: 2012-2019

Country	Enrollment
Germany	2,487
Serbia	1,426
Switzerland	590
Montenegro	262
Albania	220
North Macedonia	214
Turkey	108
Sweden	59

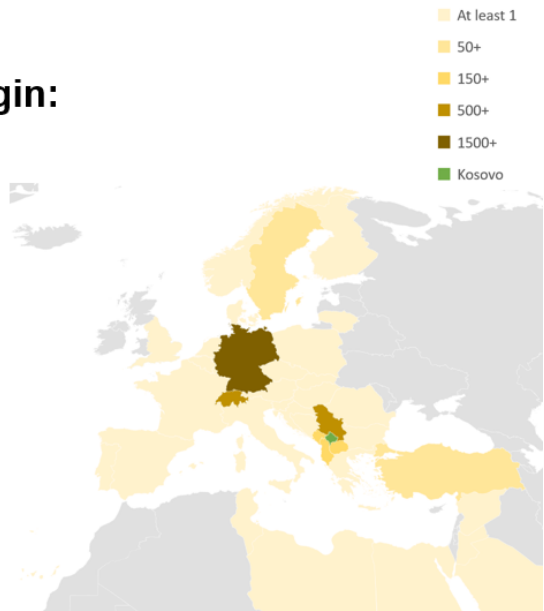


Figure 1. Frequent Countries of Origin for Students Enrolling from Outside of Kosovo

While we know where students are coming from, what do our data tell us about their relationship to Kosovo? Nearly 90.9% are Kosovars (students who identified a Kosovo municipality as their place of residence and identified Kosovo as their home country were coded as “Kosovar”), less than 1% (0.7%) are nonresident Kosovars (those who identified Kosovo as their home country but did not identify a Kosovo municipality as their place of residence were coded as “nonresident Kosovar”), and just over 8.3% are international students (those who did not identify either and were coded as “international”).

Our one-way ANOVA findings reveal the relationship of international status with personal characteristics. Post hoc comparisons found significant differences

for international students compared to both other groups related to the Albanian ethnic identity (6.9% non-Albanian internationals, v. less than 2% in the other groups), their greater enrollment in education (8.3%) and medicine (8.3%), and lower enrollment in business (18.4%). Significant differences also existed for nonresident Kosovar students compared to both other groups related to lower STEM enrollment (20.1%) and compared to international students related to higher enrollment in law programs (16.4%). Finally, significant differences were found for Kosovar students compared to international students with a slightly smaller percentage of females (51.7%, compared to approximately 56% for the other groups) and compared to both other groups related to enrollment in lower enrollment in humanities programs (9.3%).

Table 1: One-way Anova Comparison of Student Characteristics According to their Affiliation with Kosovo

Descriptor	Kosovar Students ^k	Non-Resident Kosovar Students ^{nk}	International Students ^l
Not Ethnic Albanian	1.20%	1.60%	~6.9%**
Female	^51.7%**	56.70%	56.10%
Medicine	6.20%	5.50%	~8.3%***
Education	10.80%	12.10%	~8.3%**
Business	22.70%	25.10%	~18.4%**
Law	13.60%	+16.4%**	12.60%
STEM	28.70%	#20.1%**	28.70%
Humanities	÷9.3%***	13.50%	15.50%
Social Science	8.80%	6.70%	8.10%

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Significance values denote the following comparison utilizing these symbols: ~ *i v. k & nk*; ^ *i v. k* only; + *i v. nk* only; # *nk v. k & l*; ÷ *k v. nk & i*

With respect to relative academic performance, Table 2 reveals the findings from the ANOVAs prior to the addition of the control variables. We found no significant difference between the groups in the likelihood of repeating 1st year curricula. International students' average number of exams passed was significantly lower than Kosovar students (13.5, compared to 14.7 Kosovar) and lower (although not significantly) than nonresident Kosovar students (14). All groups vary significantly from one another on grade point average (GPA). While their average number of exams passed was the lowest, international students had the highest average GPA on a scale of 6-10. This suggests that while fewer international students are passing, those who do are doing very well, complicating the concept of “success.”

Table 2: One-way Anova Comparison of Students' Academic Performance Related to their Affiliation with Kosovo

	Non-Resident		
	Kosovar Students ^k	Kosovar Students ^{nk}	International Students ⁱ
Repeated 1 st year curriculum	19.80%	22.60%	18.90%
Average number of exams passed	14.7	14	^13.5***
Average GPA (out of 10) ^{&}	7.28***	7.03***	7.46***

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Significance values denote the following comparison utilizing these symbols: ~ *i v. k & nk*; ^ *i v. k* only; + *i v. nk* only; # *nk v. k & I*; ÷ *k v. nk & I*; & all groups differ from one another

Table 3: Logistic Regression Base Model of Academic Performance

Independent Variable	Success Proxy (Exam Pass)	Failure Proxy (Repeat 1 st Year)
Female	1.87****	0.79****
Not Albanian	0.62****	1.35****
International (Reference: Kosovar)		
Nonresident Kosovar	0.77*	1.28*
International	1.11*	1
Discipline (Reference: STEM)		
Social Science	1.32****	0.42****
Education	1.92****	0.67****
Law	1.14****	0.43****
Business	1.30****	0.61****
Humanities	1.09*	0.46****
Medicine	2.52****	0.14****

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, **** $p < .0001$.

In the base model of our logistic regression (Table 3), we find that female students are significantly more likely to be successful than their male counterparts. Students who were not ethnic Albanian were more likely to need to repeat first-year curricula (OR = 1.35, $p < .0001$). In regard to international status, nonresident Kosovars were significantly more likely (OR = 1.28, $p < .001$) than their Kosovar peers to need to repeat first-year curricula, and international

students were significantly more likely to pass exams (OR = 1.11, $p < .05$) than their Kosovar peers. When compared to STEM, students in all other academic disciplines were significantly more likely to be successful, both exhibiting greater odds of exam passage and reduced odds of repeating the first year. To continue to address our second research question, we accounted for students' resident country characteristics in three different logistic regression models (Table 4).

Table 4: Odd Ratios Associated with Students' Academic Performance Based on Country Characteristics

Predictor		Success	Failure
		Proxy (Exam Pass)	Proxy (Repeat 1 st Year)
Model 1: Western Balkans, Rest of Europe, Rest of World			
Reference Groups: Kosovar Students; Western Balkans Countries	Non-Resident Kosovar	0.77*	1.28*
	International Student	0.94	1.14*
	Rest of Europe	1.32***	0.83*
	Rest of World	0.85	0.43**
Model 2: European Union			
Reference Groups: Kosovar Students; Countries not in Consideration for EU Member Status	Non-Resident Kosovar	0.77*	1.28*
	International Student	0.49	1.66
	Potential Candidate	0.31*	2.05
	Candidate	0.58***	1.35*
	Member	0.76*	1.21
Model 3: PISA Level			
Reference Groups: Kosovar Students; PISA Low-Scoring Countries	Non-Resident Kosovar	0.77*	1.28*
	International Student	1.14	1.07
	Level 2	0.77	1.03
	Level 3	1.08	0.89

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, $p < .0001$.

For reference, the base model from Table 3 is included. Once accounting for geography, the effect of international student status was rendered insignificant, and international students saw an increased likelihood of failure (Model 1: OR=1.14, $p < .05$). However, in Model 1, when accounting for specific geographic

regions, students from European countries outside of the Western Balkans (Model 1: OR=1.32, $p<.001$) are significantly more likely to be successful than their Western Balkan peers, but students from the rest of the world are not. Accounting for students from countries of EU member status (Model 2), this location likewise rendered the effect of international status insignificant despite large shifts in the coefficients. All students from countries identified as EU members (Model 2: OR=0.76, $p<.05$), EU candidates (Model 2: OR=0.58, $p<.001$), or EU potential candidates (Model 2: OR=0.31, $p<.05$) were less likely to be successful than their peers from EU nonmember countries. In addition, students from candidate countries are significantly more likely to fail (Model 2: OR=1.35, $p<.05$). Finally, accounting for countries' PISA levels rendered the effect of international status insignificant once again. Of note, the differences between the PISA groups themselves were not significant.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Notably, this is the first study to consider international students' enrollment in Kosovo. Our findings allow us to characterize which international students pursue their studies in Kosovo public universities and how they perform academically while enrolled.

Our findings reveal that countries of origin align with prior waves of outbound migration from Kosovo (Veljanovska Blazhevaska, 2017) and that the vast majority of international students who choose to attend Kosovo's public universities are ethnically Albanian (93%). Considering the mobility literature and consistent with Abbott and Silles's (2015) work regarding the importance of language and geographic proximity of one's home country, our findings suggest that the Albanian culture, language, and community in Kosovo are large pulls for students individually. The top sending countries are either in the Western Balkans or Western Europe – relatively close in proximity. Collectively, these patterns suggest a small but significant youth return migration to Kosovo, at least for education, which is consistent with what Brooks and Waters (2021) assert is possible with respect to diaspora communities. Our study did not directly measure students' motivation per se, although we do know there are a large number of students who identify as Albanian choosing to cross borders to attend university in a nation with the most academically prestigious Albanian language university in the world.

Extrapolating from our findings, we assert that our evidence underscores a likely relationship between being a student of Albanian descent and choosing a primarily Albanian language institution. It is probable that pursuing a culturally and linguistically relevant education is of greater importance to these ethnic Albanian international students compared to obtaining a more portable credential from their resident country's national context. While the evidence is mixed (positive and negative) in multinational analyses connecting a specific common culture or language between the student and the destination country (Mayda, 2010; Beine Noël, & Ragot, 2014), there is some scholarly precedent for our interpretation because of the tie to the Albanian language and culture. Hoxha and

Hoxha's (2020) work linked cultural similarities as a motivation for students to study in Albania as a postconflict nation, along with its low tuition and study program offerings. Kosovo resembles Albania in these ways, and again, while we did not measure incoming students' motivations or their language capabilities, our findings hold infinite promise for explaining the patterns we observed in our data. (Notably, in other studies, language match is typically assessed through proxy characteristics (Perkins & Neumayer, 2014), just as we have measured in interpreting a matching Albanian ethnic identity with the Albanian language of instruction.) Alternately, even if incoming students to Kosovo do not possess strong Albanian fluency, choosing it as a destination may be in part a motivation to improve Albanian language skills because destination countries have been observed to be more desirable to students because they present an opportunity to improve particular language skills (Kahanec & Králiková, 2011).

With respect to the contexts of students' resident home countries, there are distinct patterns in academic performance. Our descriptive data indicated that students coming from European countries outside the Western Balkans succeed at higher rates than students coming from the Western Balkans. Furthermore, one's country's EU status contributed to predicting students' academic success – nonEU affiliates (e.g., potential, candidate, or member countries) fared better academically. That said, we did not observe a relationship between a student's home country's PISA scores and their relative success. This pattern suggests that geography plays a role that is distinct from the quality of a nation's preuniversity educational system. Overall, through our research, we can say that it is not one's international student status that corresponds to their relative academic success; rather, success tends to align with the characteristics of a student's country of origin. Future qualitative studies may reveal the complex nuances of these national dynamics of international students from diverse places.

With this analysis, we contribute to the literature on international students who choose to study in low GDP (Wei, 2013) and/or postconflict countries. Our study complicates traditional models of student mobility, thereby offering some nuance to the nature of the two-way flows of students that exceed instrumental choice characteristics (Finn, 2017; Wei, 2013). With the majority of international students in our study coming from Germany, Serbia, and Switzerland, identifying as primarily ethnic Albanian and having reduced odds of academically succeeding relative to their home country's EU political context (potential candidate, candidate, member), it is these three criteria where we see the potential for Kosovo to capitalize on the knowledge gain potential among its international students (Brooks & Water, 2021).

Future studies might directly examine international students' financial resources (family income or socioeconomic status) and/or familial ties to relatives in Kosovo as a means of drawing more precise conclusions that might attract students to stay after they study. Notably, while Kosovo has begun to pursue "brain gain" strategies with financial incentives for diaspora-affiliated professors to collaborate with Kosovo's universities, this strategy has not yielded much activity (Tatalović, 2014). Rather, based on our findings, Kosovo might better facilitate brain gain by incentivizing international students to stay in Kosovo. In

fact, our descriptive findings reveal that international students and nonresident Kosovars outperform their Kosovar peers academically, thereby suggesting that these incoming students are among the most academically talented individuals Kosovo has in their universities. The nation might prioritize students earning degrees in fields with labor shortages such as technology (World Bank, 2017) and health (BPRG, 2023), especially in the health sector, since we observed more international students enrolling in medicine compared to other students. Similarly, Kosovo could encourage international students coming from specific nations, such as non-EU affiliated countries (non-EU potential, candidates, or members), since these students have greater chances of being academically successful after controlling for other factors. Moreover, our findings coupled with Brooks and Waters's (2021) prior work suggest that brain gain may be possible with a targeted national strategy.

Last, our findings particularly highlight the important role of ethnic and national cultures in both the decision to become academically mobile and to enroll outside of one's resident country and as a predictor of academic success. As we progress this work, the next line of inquiry is to evaluate the stay rates of international students. International student mobility is often associated with intellectual migration, where students often stay and work in the countries where they enroll. In Kosovo, the directionality between studying and subsequent employment is not necessarily clear. Unemployment is high among youth but less so among university degree holders (Gashi & Bartlett, 2015). There is also a need for high-skilled talent in areas such as information computing technology and health fields (BPRG, 2023). However, the relative wages in Kosovo remain low compared to other European nations (Indeks Online, 2024). Rosenzweig (2009) observed that the relative difference in compensation between origin and destination countries is a strong predictor of whether students choose to stay in their study country.

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ⁱ For Kosovans, with its political precarity of it not being in the European Union, nor a candidate country, citizens have been restricted from traveling freely in Europe. After a 12-year pursuit, in January of 2024 the EU agreed to visa liberalization which created opportunities for Kosovans to travel visa free (Regulation (EU) 2023/850, 2023).

ⁱⁱ The universities where universities utilize Albanian as a primary language of instruction are located in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. However, there are also at least two other universities that offer Albanian language courses and the study of Albanology (Uppsala University in Sweden and University College London in the UK).