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RESEARCH BRIEF

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What do student visas cost? A global comparative analysis

ABSTRACT

A visa is often required for international student mobility. The costs for this vary enormously, as data from the Global Mobilities Project (GMP) shows. Students from the Global South sometimes pay more than twice as much as students from Europe. The differences are even greater when the standard of living is taken into account: While the costs for students from Western Europe amount to only a fraction of the average daily income, students from Central Asia would have to work for almost three weeks and those from sub-Saharan Africa for more than five weeks to afford a visa. The overall result is therefore a paradoxical situation: students from richer countries have to pay less if they want to be internationally mobile. These global inequalities are connected to injustices at the individual level and point to the dysfunctionality of visa regimes that structurally restrict the international mobility of talented people from the Global South.

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Introduction

International student mobility is globally characterized by great inequality. The majority of mobility takes place between a small number of country pairs (Delhey et al., 2020, p. 112 ff.; Deutschmann, 2021, p. 175). Just seven host countries account for half of all internationally mobile students worldwide.[1] This alone raises important questions about equal opportunities and global justice. However, there is another dimension that has received relatively little attention to date: the price that internationally mobile students have to pay to apply for a visa for their planned stay abroad. The fact that this factor also varies greatly depending on the country of origin is discussed in this paper.

Establishing visa restrictions is an important means for states to regulate incoming mobility from abroad. Whether a visa is required (and what criteria, if any, are used as a basis for its approval) is therefore a key factor in national border control.

1 Calculation by the author based on UNESCO data for 2018. The seven most important host countries for international students are the US, the UK, Australia, Germany, Russia, France and Canada.

AUTHOR

Dr Emanuel Deutschmann *is an assistant professor of sociological theory at the University of Flensburg and an associate at the Migration Policy Centre of the European University Institute in Florence.*

Visas give states the opportunity to check potential entries (a) in advance and (b) far away from their own territory – typically in consulates in the country of origin of those wishing to travel. They therefore make it possible to pre-screen and deter persons who are deemed unwanted before they even start their journey.

Czaika et al. (2018) show that historical and geopolitical relationships play a role in whether and under what conditions states demand visas from nationals of other states. In addition to bilateral agreements, it is primarily regional organisations such as the European Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Association of East Asian Nations (ASEAN) that conclude visa waiver agreements. Overall, however, a visa is still required between around three quarters of all pairs of countries worldwide (Czaika et al., pp. 13-14). The longitudinal analyses by Czaika et al. (2018) also show that states adapt visa regulations in order to react to current developments, such as an increasing number of asylum applications, discontent over high foreign direct investment from certain countries or to exert pressure in international relations.

However, the data available to date on global visa structures has two key limitations: First, they only contain information on whether a visa is required or not. How much it costs to apply for such an entry permit has not been systematically recorded to date. Second, they mainly relate to travel visas in general. However, little is known about specific visas, for example for study visits. Both restrictions are being addressed in a current research project.

The Global Mobilities Project (GMP)[2], based at the European University Institute in Florence, investigated how much it costs to apply for visas, i.e. travel permits, worldwide – depending on where you come from and which country you are going to. Data was collected in six categories: tourism, business travel, work, family reunification, transit – and student mobility[3].

Methodical approach

The data from the GMP Global Visa Cost Dataset was collected from April to September 2019, with some gaps closed in November 2020 by an additional data collection. In the vast majority of cases, the sources were the official government websites of the destination country, where information on visa costs can be found depending on the country of origin. This may be the website of a ministry or a consulate. All visa costs refer to the year 2019 and are converted into US dollars. The costs for applying for a visa, in this case for a study visit to a specific country, depend on which country you come from.

Prospects of success or rejection rates and related factors, such as the fact that a rejected visa application usually results in a financial loss and also prevents the applicant from travelling abroad, were not included in the data collection. Additional cost factors and other obstacles, such as the issuing of a passport, the trip to the consulate or proof of financial reserves, were also not taken into account. The visa costs collected are therefore the absolute minimum in terms of financial outlay; the real hurdles and actual expenditure may be significantly higher. In total, the dataset contains information on the costs of almost 100,000 visas. Regarding visas for student mobility, the costs of entry permits for 7,454 country-pair combinations are recorded.

It should be noted that the data from the GMP Global Visa Cost Dataset (freely available on the project website) is significantly less complete for student visas than for tourist visas, for example. This is partly for substantial reasons (there are simply no students moving between many pairs of countries worldwide; see the inequality findings mentioned above), but it is also partly due to the poorer accessibility of the relevant information. It is important to keep this limitation in mind when looking at the following findings. Nonetheless, the data provide an initial insight into global inequalities in visa costs for students.

2 More detailed information about the Global Mobilities Project can be found on the project website: *https://migrationpolicycentre.eu/projects/global-mobilities-project*.

3 Findings based on data for tourist visas have already been published (Recchi et al., 2021).

Key findings

Students from the Global South have to pay significantly more for visas than students from the Global North. Figure 1 gives an initial impression of this, showing the average cost of a student visa depending on the region of origin, expressed in US dollars. As can be seen, there is a wide range: while students from Western Europe pay an average of just under 43 US dollars for a study visa, students from South and Central Asia have to spend more than twice as much at just over 100 US dollars.

What happens if the different income levels in different parts of the world are also taken into account? In other words: How long does someone from each region have to work on average to be able to afford a student visa? This is shown in Figure 2, which visualizes the student visa costs by region of origin in average daily incomes. As can be seen, the global discrepancy has widened considerably. While people in Western and Northern Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand only have to work a fraction of a day on average to be able to afford a visa, it takes several weeks in Central and South Asia and even more than a month in sub-Saharan Africa. So there are enormous global inequalities. And for individual countries of origin, the costs can be significantly higher than for the aggregated regions of origin shown here (see Recchi et al., 2021).

Overall, a paradoxical situation arises: the richer a country of origin (measured, for example, by gross national income per capita), the less students living there have to pay to go to another country to study, both in absolute terms (in US dollars) and relative to average income.

The Gospel of Matthew in the Bible says: “For whoever has, to him shall be given that he may have abundance; but whoever does not have, from him shall be taken even that which he has.” In the 1960s, sociologist Robert K. Merton derived the “Matthew effect of science” from this. He showed that well-known researchers are cited more simply because

FIGURE 1 AVERAGE APPLICATION COSTS FOR STUDENT VISAS BY REGION OF ORIGIN (IN US DOLLARS)

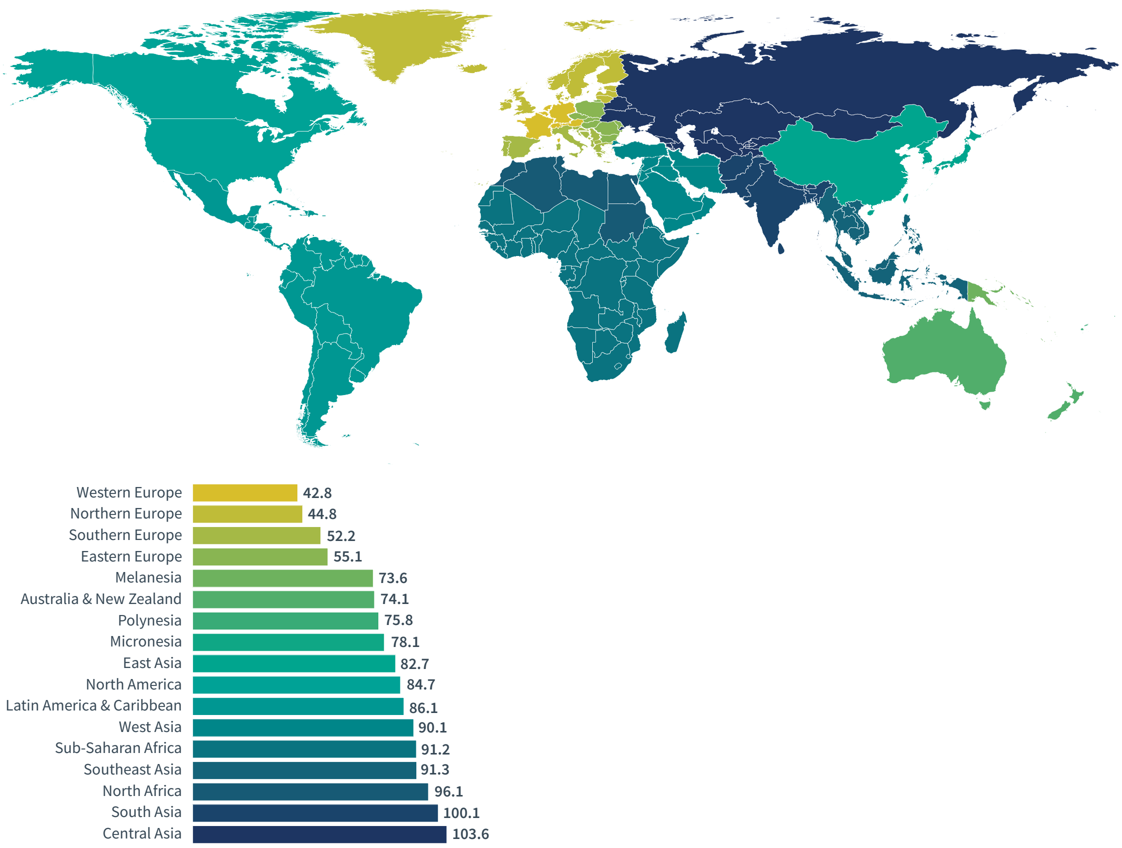
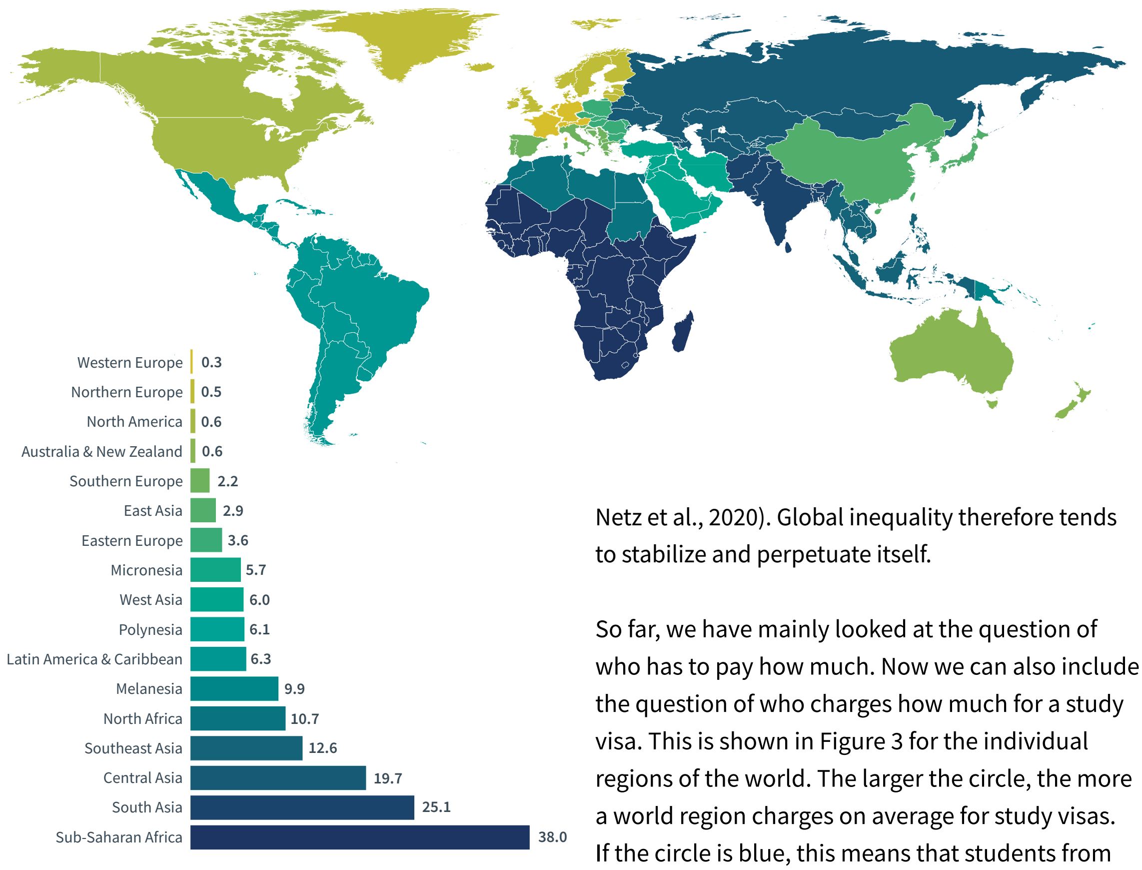


FIGURE 2 AVERAGE APPLICATION COSTS FOR STUDENT VISAS BY REGION OF ORIGIN (IN AVERAGE DAILY INCOMES)



they are well-known (Merton, 1968).[4] There is a very similar phenomenon with entry permits, which could be described as the *Matthew effect of visa costs*: Those who come from a richer country have to pay less, so they remain rich, while students from poorer countries have to spend more and thus tend to become even poorer.

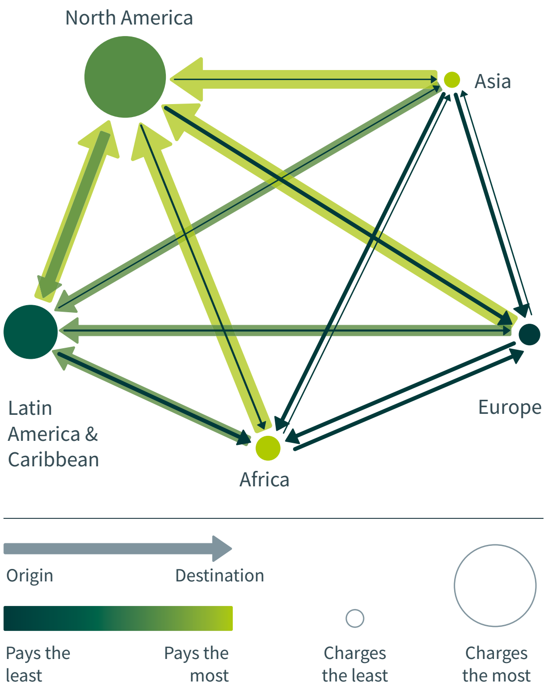
As higher visa costs can also prevent study visits (and additional obstacles such as higher rejection rates for applications are not even taken into account here), there may be a self-reinforcing momentum. This is because those who are unable to study abroad due to prohibitively high costs will also not benefit from the expected positive effects, for example in the form of better jobs, promotion opportunities and higher incomes that such an academic experience abroad can bring on the labor market (Gerhards et al., 2017; Netz et al., 2020). Global inequality therefore tends to stabilize and perpetuate itself.

So far, we have mainly looked at the question of who has to pay how much. Now we can also include the question of who charges how much for a study visa. This is shown in Figure 3 for the individual regions of the world. The larger the circle, the more a world region charges on average for study visas. If the circle is blue, this means that students from this world region have to pay very little themselves if they need a study visa – if it is red, on the other hand, they have to pay a relatively high amount. The arrows between the circles indicate the direction of travel. The thickness and color of the arrow corresponds to the average cost of a student visa.

Here, too, discrepant patterns become apparent: Europe has to pay relatively little, but demands comparatively little itself. North America, on the other hand, also has to spend relatively little (with the exception of student mobility to Latin America, which is relatively expensive), but demands a great deal from incoming students (note the red, unusually thick incoming arrows from all other regions of the world). Africa and Asia, on the other hand, are regions that demand relatively little but have to pay a lot themselves. One can also see that the study visa costs in the opposite directions are often very different (e.g. very high from Asia to North America,

4 Merton did this with the help of research material provided by his wife Harriet Zuckerman, who was not named as a co-author and remained much less famous than he did (vgl. Merton 1995).

FIGURE 3 THE GLOBAL NETWORK OF STUDENT VISA COSTS: WHO CHARGES HOW MUCH FROM WHOM?



but very low from North America to Asia). The global network of study visa costs therefore appears to be characterized by imbalances rather than reciprocity (i.e. equally high or low costs in both directions).[5]

It is also important to note once again that the data set is partially incomplete and therefore only an approximate picture of global network relationships can be drawn (for this reason, Oceania is also missing from the presentation). Furthermore, the macro perspective shown here obscures the variance within the world regions. It is therefore advisable to take a look at the freely available data set, which breaks down all visa costs by country pairs. Nonetheless, Figure 3 clearly shows that the global network of study visa costs is characterized by great inequality.

Conclusion & discussion

Travel permits allow states to regulate incoming mobility (Mau, 2013; Czaika & Neumayer, 2017). For potential travelers, however, visas are associated with costs and may represent a barrier to international mobility. If the costs are prohibitively high, they can prevent stays abroad. Visa costs therefore influence the global structure of international student mobility.

For a more detailed examination, this article took a comparative look at the costs of study visas worldwide. This showed that the costs vary greatly depending on where you come from and where you are going. For example, people from countries in the Global South often have to pay many times more for study visas than people from the Global North, particularly from Western and Northern Europe. This discrepancy becomes even greater when the level of prosperity is taken into account: While people in Western Europe, Scandinavia, North America, Australia and New Zealand would only have to work a fraction of a day on average to be able to afford a visa to study abroad, the cost of an entry permit in large parts of the Global South is equivalent to several weeks of average working time.

This imbalance raises important questions. From a normative perspective, the fairness of this system can be questioned: Why should regional origin influence how much someone has to pay for a study abroad visa? Shouldn't every person – regardless of their place of birth or nationality – have the same opportunities to study abroad? As already mentioned, such stays abroad lead to "transnational human capital" (Gerhards et al., 2017), which in turn can bring material advantages on the labor market. If access is selective, this poses an equity problem.

5 At the country pair level (which also includes visa costs within world regions), however, it can be shown that reciprocity does play a significant role (see Recchi et al., 2021, p. 9, as well as unpublished regression analyses specifically of student visa data).

From a functionalist perspective, the question arises as to whether the current system leads to the talent of many young people remaining untapped. If the cost of applying for a visa corresponds to the average salary of several weeks or even months, this represents an insurmountable obstacle for large sections of the population. This applies all the more as the analysis presented here does not even take into account additional obstacles, such as globally varying rejection rates for entry permits, bureaucratic, spatial and technical barriers to applying for a visa, especially in rural areas, or the obligation to provide evidence of sometimes very high financial reserves (e.g. in the form of blocked accounts). These are often even greater hurdles than the visa costs themselves.

To summarize: a truly meritocratic system would be interested in enabling the most talented international students worldwide to study abroad – regardless of where they come from. However, the current situation tends to prevent the international mobility of highly talented young people from the Global South due to the sometimes prohibitively high visa costs. This is not only unfair (in terms of the life and educational opportunities of these people), but also dysfunctional (in terms of “human capital” and the innovation potential of society).

One solution to this problem would be to make the cost of applying for a visa dependent on the level of prosperity in the country of origin: the lower the standard of living, the lower the visa costs – in other words, the exact opposite of the current system with its paradoxical Matthew effect. Another solution would be to reduce the cost of study visas in general or abolish them altogether. Since international students are a very small group globally compared to tourists and business travelers, there is little to be said against keeping visa costs as low as possible for them.

The removal of visa restrictions also leads not only to more, but also to better applications from international students (Chevalier, 2014). Furthermore, data from Denmark shows that even where international students receive extensive state funding, the host country also benefits financially from international students (Smith, 2015). Eliminating visa costs could therefore be a suitable way to reduce a form of global inequality from which many sides would benefit.

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Editor
Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst e.V. (DAAD)
Kennedyallee 50, D-53175 Bonn,
Tel.: +49 228 882-0, Fax: +49 228 882-444
E-Mail: webmaster@daad.de, Internet: https://www.daad.de
Authorised Representative of the Executive Committee:
Prof Dr Joybrato Mukherjee, District Court of Bonn,
Register of associations, number VR 2107,
Sales tax number: DE122276332
Person responsible according to § 18 Abs. 2 MStV:
Dr Kai Sicks, Kennedyallee 50, 53175 Bonn

Contact
Section Research and Studies – S15
Dr Jan Kercher, kercher@daad.de

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