# The Dynamic of Social Mobility Through Migration and Higher Education a Study on Indonesian Migrant Workers-Students

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**Abstract.** To what extent is the social structure fluid? Does higher education offer opportunities to move past it? It has always been a matter of contemporary sociological and political debate. The continuous and rapid technological changes that characterize modern capitalist economies require a highly specialized and skilled workforce. According to this theory, the recruitment of workers cannot be based on consideration of individual descriptive factors, such as gender, social class, or race, but needs to be based on the evaluation of the abilities and skills of workers. In this context, educational credentials are a solid indicator of selecting qualified workers. From the individual point of view, education is also a tool for social mobility. Various explanations have been proposed to describe the mechanism by which social class of origin influences the distribution of educational credentials. This article describes the phenomenon of higher education for migrant workers. Higher education by migrant workers is considered an alternative pathway to social mobility to achieve higher social status. Based on the qualitative research, this article examined the dynamics of migrant worker-students social mobility. A phenomenological approach is used to see the views and experiences of higher education for Indonesian migrant workers. The data are analyzed using Bourdieu's framework of habitus, arena, and capital to show the dynamics of the struggle of migrant workers. Besides, Baudrillard's view of hyperreality is used to explain the social position of these dynamics. This research shows that although there is an increase in educational opportunities, it does not automatically make migrant workers' credentials capital in the labor market arena. The result is significant for designing higher education curricula for particular groups. Higher academic qualifications do not necessarily provide employment opportunities at the same pace. Economic and cultural capital as a consequence of student-migrant workers brings them to the ebb and flow of social status dynamics that have never placed them in the above position.

**Keywords:** Cultural Capital · Higher Education · Migration · Social Mobility

## 1 Introduction

Education is not only school-based learning but also includes various socially legitimate training and learning processes in which members of a particular society define themselves and are recognized as knowledgeable and educated according to specific cultural

criteria [1]. The meaning and practice of education are increasingly shifting, depending on the context and situation. Education is not synonymous with but includes the formal school system. This system has become an integral part of the formation of colonial and postcolonial societies. This condition relates to developing the nation-state as a form of politics [2].

Education has also played a vital role worldwide as a mode of social and economic mobility for those who aspire to middle-class status, as witnessed by migration studies concerning the late colonial or postcolonial world. Higher education worldwide is a relational environment that is simultaneously global, national, and local [3, 4]. These relations include international institutions, governments, national systems, professions, e-learning companies, and others. Education is also considered the basis for the legitimate mobility of tastes [5].

Higher education is often described as having a negative correlation with the working class [6, 7], but often the underlying perception is a pathological identity [7]. The solution usually offered is class mobility to get out of working-class identity [9, 10]. The conceptualization of working-class identity as a hurdle that needs to be overcome hinges on the assumption that it is an invalid identity in education, thereby denying any value attribution to the working class. Some studies claim that working-class culture is viewed more positively; for example, [10] found that most working-class informants wanted to describe their social identity as ordinary regardless of economic capital. Education is often taken for granted as the answer to upward mobility for the working class [11].

Higher education aims to develop graduates' academic achievement and knowledge retention capacity to prepare them for productive lives [13, 14]. Higher education incorporates service to the community as part of their learning culture. Therefore, education is often considered a sensible investment for society, companies, and individuals. On the one hand, increased education seems to lead to better professional qualifications. On the other hand, individuals improve their ability to adapt, acquire and process information and their capacity for independent thinking. It seems that, over time, improvements in (professional) education go hand in hand, at least in some cases, with better economic outcomes and other positive outcomes.

However, the goal of higher education has shifted to obtaining higher education certificates. It is increasingly visible, namely, the importance of degrees on paper (credentials) as a representation of skills and knowledge. Of course, there is no denying that, at least, getting a university credential requires skills and knowledge, for example, in the form of an exam. Nevertheless, that can be countered by the increased functionality of study, i.e., study to obtain a certificate rather than to acquire the skills and knowledge it represents – and by switching off higher education which makes granting credentials easier. [14]. Such an argument requires at least some contextualization: The increase in student numbers has not been matched by increased investment and the introduction of fees. Students, especially the lower classes, may need to combine work and study to make ends meet [16, 17].

The status of students has changed people's views of migrant workers, especially people from their areas of origin. Indonesian migrant workers-students may find it challenging to engage in university academia and find the labor market less satisfying than

they might expect, particularly for undergraduate employment. As student-migrant workers, Indonesian migrant worker-students in Korea feel they have more value than their fellow migrant workers. They choose to continue their education because their goals are delayed.

At the time in Indonesia, college was not a priority when they graduated from high school. In addition to the lack of motivation from the environment, the economic factor is the main obstacle. While in Korea, with a basic salary as migrant workers, they feel they can afford the tuition packages offered by the university.

For Indonesian migrant workers-students in Korea, tuition fees are not a significant obstacle. Tuition fees per semester are only around 1.5–2% of their income. For them, deciding to continue their studies at the university is also not necessary to fill their spare time. Migrant workers perceive this as their chance to earn a bachelor's degree (credential). Their views on higher education are colored with optimism about changing social status or other people's perceptions of their quality as migrant workers [17].

Informants in this study said that in the future if they receive the credential, it is not going to be a capital to get a better job in the formal sector in Indonesia. Achievement as a graduate is closer to increasing prestige or self-confidence than status as a migrant worker. Higher education for Indonesian migrant workers can be seen as a way of accumulating cultural capital, which is then converted back into social status, a social network to facilitate the reproduction of benefits such as class mobility and social capital.

## 2  Method

This article was based on qualitative research with a phenomenological approach that emphasized the views and experiences of higher education for Indonesian migrant workers. Emphasis was placed on how migration experiences and higher education impacted the social status of Indonesian migrant workers in society. Phenomenology focused on perceptions of their appearance and the way the world appeared to people. Within this framework, phenomenologists were primarily concerned with their subjects' authentic and subjective experiences. Subjective experience in making meaning of migration and higher education experiences was essential in phenomenological research, so it was necessary to pay attention to the specific ways subjects could consciously reflect on and experience their life world [18].

This study examined the phenomenon of Indonesian migrant workers-students studying at the Indonesian Open University in Korea. Data was collected through literature studies and field observations of the life experiences of Indonesian migrant worker subjects -students and alumni during 2018–2019. The data was organized based on relevant themes and followed the research focus. Research results were presented narratively in various ways, such as descriptions and reflections on the experiences of student-migrant workers. Thematic analysis, in which the researcher tried to find salient and specific expressions, phrases, or explanations, described how they gained migration experiences and experiences as students.

## 3   Higher Education for Migrant Workers

The collection of resources - actual or potential - connected to the possession of a solid web of more or less standardized connections was known as social capital. In other words, belonging to a group gave each member the support of jointly owned resources, a status that entitled them to praise in various contexts. These relationships might exist only in practical circumstances, in material and symbolic exchanges that helped to maintain them. They could also be socially institutionalized and secured by adopting a common name (surname, class, tribe, school, party, etc.). The initial act of institutions, reflected in the case of the family group by the genealogical definition of kinship relations, which was genealogically typical of social formations, created a network of links; it was not a natural nor even a social gift [19]. The network was a product of investment strategy. The network aimed to establish or reproduce social relationships that could be used immediately in the short and long term. Networking could also transform contingent relationships, for example, environment, workplace, or even kinship, into necessary and elective relationships, implying subjectively perceived long-term obligations, such as gratitude, respect, friendship, etc.

Academic approval for cultural capital was provided through legally protected credentials that were formally independent of the holder. Certificates of cultural competency offered conventional, consistent, and legally guaranteed value, similar to academic credentials. In this instance, one might observe the performative magic of institutionalizing power, the ability to establish and maintain trust, or, to put it another way, the ability to compel acknowledgment. Academic approval for cultural capital was provided [19].

Academic credentials also enabled the comparison and interchange of qualification holders by offering institutional recognition of the cultural capital of any agency. Additionally, by ensuring the monetary value of the specified intellectual capital, the conversion rate between cultural and economic capital could be set [19].

The result of this transformation of economic wealth into cultural capital, in the words of Bourdieu (1986), established value. Changes in the structure of the profit opportunities provided by various types of capital, one of the short-term causes of the educational boom and qualification inflation, regulated the strategy for converting economic capital into cultural capital.

Thus, pursuing higher education was not always about education/learning but was often deeply embedded in a particular social context and motivated by socio-culturally shaped passion and imagination [20]. Indonesian migrant worker students in Korea realized that a higher education degree did not mean providing extensive formal job opportunities.

Migrant workers who continued their education tried to fulfill higher needs, in which basic needs have been met. The increase in income in Korea and the affordable cost of education in Korea gave the impression that the cost of education was not too burdensome for them. In the context of Indonesian migrant workers-students, their income in Korea was not affected by their educational background or status as students.

Higher education status for Indonesian migrant workers was a luxury, a hope that was very difficult to achieve in Indonesia. Consumption of higher education as a splendor meant an effort to give ourselves, work groups, organizations, or even the community around us, a positive image [21]. Such splendor or luxury involved the representation or

loading of phenomena to appear as attractive as possible within the framework of what seems reasonable. Wherever possible, education was going to symbolically upgrade one's status, more impressive by putting aside the issue of substance.

Investment in higher education meant greater economic prosperity. Such observations often oversimplified whether rich countries had a higher education than poorer countries or that people with more comprehensive education earned higher incomes than others. Correlation, of course, was not the same as cause-and-effect [21].

Higher education was considered an indication of increasing human capital or the ability of the person concerned. Higher education payments were considered a proxy for the productive capacity and contribution of the person. There were some complications here. The correlation between more comprehensive education and higher income (and generally access to more prestigious and attractive jobs) could be explained by the education signaling factor or its value as a credential. Education as a signal system meant the ability of intelligence, reliability, and work morale of individuals indicated by their educational status. It was not the learning or qualification of obtaining the material but the completion of education as a proxy for intellectual capacity.

Therefore, the causal effect of intelligence, perseverance and the class background leading to more significant salaries was concealed by the link between education level and income or was only to a lesser extent to believe that formal credentials strongly indicated one's talents. According to Bourdieu (1986), economic capital served as the foundation for all other forms of capital. Most individuals believed that formal credentials served as a reliable indicator of one's talents, even though the altered and camouflaged forms of economic capital were never totally reducible [19].

Policies often assumed that working-class deficit positions and higher education could assist them in higher social mobility. This situation created conditions where those with an interest and power could promote certain lifestyles (e.g., higher education) as more valuable than others [22].

## 3.1  Higher Education Arena for Indonesian Migrant Workers

In higher education, there were positions of the dominance of agents and the structure of the higher education market. Indonesian migrant workers-students with the existing accumulation of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital have entered the realm of higher education. The realm of higher education was where the cultural capitals of Indonesian migrant workers-students were achieved and fought. In Bourdieu's conception of capital, this could be seen as an arena where Indonesian migrant workers and students struggled through investment in cultural capital. In Bourdieu's view, cultural capital was competence or cultural knowledge institutionalized through educational qualifications. Education gives a person knowledge and competencies needed to make distinctions or value judgments [23].

Individuals created the arena, positioned objectively within the framework of social relations that controlled various sources (different types of capital) and strived for dignity/prestige, prosperity, and power. In the academic arena, some individuals were positioned in objective relationships determined by universities, faculties, or study programs that competed for authority, energy, and prestige by using available capital (social relations and knowledge relations).

Bourdieu argued that different arenas had different values of capital and resources. Capital refers to resources or qualities individuals possess with social value or influence. For example, cultural capital (knowledge) and trust were the primary resources in the struggle for dominance in the academic field and, to a lesser extent, in the economic arena competition. For Bourdieu, the arena was a configuration of defined objective positions in their environment regarding the coercive conditions of communities, agents, and institutions. The medium of this relation was "capital," which was the product and process in the arena. All capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) were symbols whose configurations applied to shape social practice. In the end, capital came from economic power. It caused economic consequences, but economic capital was often expressed as social and cultural capital, which meant that the economic implications of capital were often misunderstood in social and cultural phenomena [24].

The cultural capital of migrant workers-student was formed from the knowledge gained during the study transmitted through their social environment, which developed a durable disposition (the result of personal work and acquisition without being aware of it). Cultural capital was formed by placing individuals in an objective position with the social environment, so all cultural wealth (books, works of art) could be owned materially (assuming economic capital) in contrast to symbolic ownership (considering cultural capital). Forms of cultural capital were also institutionalized, for example, educational degrees that institutions legalized. The arena of higher education has created a habitus of academics.

The demand for objectivity in the academic world resulted from educational construction that shaped the characteristics of the university arena, which was organized hierarchically through the product of positional power or intellectual capital and prestige by maintaining positions. This dynamic was the focus of Bourdieu's attention to critique how knowledge was reproduced and used as a tool of power [25].

In higher education, migrant worker-students were in the same arena as other agents, each struggling for cultural, social, and symbolic capital. In this arena, they were in an objective relationship with regular students (local and international), mentors, lecturers, university officials, and all parties with links and interests in the university. Although they seemed fluid, the agents in this arena were likely to change positions and still placed migrant workers in the lowest position through their cultural, social, and symbolic capital ownership, especially from the objectives that they went to Korea in the status of migrant workers.

In higher education, Indonesian migrant workers-students forged new experiences, accepted all pervasively modified educational values, and formed unique preferences about higher education. However, the preferences formed could not be separated from the old habits of Indonesian migrant workers as the working class. Thus, the higher education values they received were not necessarily translated as higher education values for the middle class (e.g., regular students and mentors). Supposing for regular students and mentors of higher education, it was a struggle for economic and symbolic capital (prestigious, well-established, and prestigious jobs because they were graduates of foreign universities) for Indonesian migrant workers-higher education students. In that case, it was used as a struggle toward symbolic capital (status as people who were educated).

The limits of the power of allocating education have been hidden by the narrative of education services and human capital in which responsibility for more equitable social outcomes was neglected. The intergenerational correlation of education and income earned, which measured the reproduction of skill hierarchies over time, did not show a more significant trend toward greater mobility in the long run [26].

It appeared that higher education participated in allocating and marketing youth aspirations, in which students were framed as consumers whose educational desires were increasingly co-opted into the commercial agenda. Thus, the discourse of degree opportunity helped prepare local understandings of prestigious education. The belief that this system offered the possibility of making university education without limits contributed to widening participation and represented a more democratic moment of education and learning [20].

It is worth noting how the real transnational educational experience was shaped through the reproduction of power relations and value hierarchies. Although many of them were privileged enough to continue their university education, compared to youth who did not benefit from migration opportunities and the financial capabilities of migrant workers, students faced uncertainty in job prospects [27].

Indonesian migrant workers-students also did not have access to various job opportunities, unlike their counterparts who studied regularly at multiple universities. Although they realized that their decisions were not based on job opportunities, it was also mainly due to a lack of trust in the program and credentials by employers and tenants, which could be attributed to several factors, including stereotyped views about the quality of students and programs. The second point, higher education for migrant workers, has been postulated to have a democratizing impact on participation in higher education.

Bourdieu has sought to open the higher education function by developing the core concepts of the arena, capital, and habitus. At the same time, these constructs were fully functional only concerning each other. Bourdieu developed an understanding of the operation of practices that occurred in higher education using strategy. The concept of strategy was understood as an orientation of exercise contrary to the meaning in ordinary language. In a general sense, strategy was based on calculating awareness. In contrast, according to Bourdieu, the strategy depended on the habitus resulting from a subconscious disposition to act or think in a certain way [28].

## 3.2 Hiper –Social Mobility

Studies of migrants in Korea also revealed that unskilled workers experienced poor working and living conditions and were alienated from the broader society. Moreover, the sense of Korean ethnic nationalism also contributed to the exclusion of migrants in Korea, in which Koreans have a unified image of us-Korea in Korean culture known as "*uri*" [29]. This situation further reinforced the migrants as an invisible minority. Although the emergence of official organizations could refute this view under Korean law that facilitated the existence of migrants.

In addition, Indonesian migrant workers in Korea also faced differences from another Indonesian diaspora in Korea. In general, this study showed that the grouping of the Indonesian diaspora in Korea was divided into two major groups, namely the student diaspora (including families, expatriates, embassy officials, and Indonesian banks in Korea)

and the migrant worker diaspora (manufacturing and fisheries sectors). For example, PERPIKA (Perkumpulan Pelajar Indonesia di Korea/Indonesian Student Association in Korea) is an Indonesian student organization, and ICC (Indonesian Community Center) is an organization for migrant workers groups.

This study also revealed that among migrants, there was a kind of grouping of migrants. First, Indonesian migrant workers who went to East Asian countries (Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong) felt their status was higher than migrant workers who went to the United Arab Emirates/UAE and Southeast Asia (Malaysia and Singapore). That kind of feeling, especially for migrant workers in Korea, was due to (1) the type of work (not domestic work), (2) the level of difficulty in being able to take the Employee Permit System (EPS) exam to get to work in Korea, (3) the employment contract and a more secure system as well as higher income. The Korean immigration system also supported this diaspora grouping in determining the visa type.

Indonesian migrant workers were Korean-type "E" visa holders. Type E visa was a work visa for foreign workers in Korea. However, the E visa type has several levels, namely E1-E10, and migrant workers are holders of E-9 and E-10 visas, which are the lowest level in the E visa type because they are intended for unskilled workers. The E-9 visa was for migrant workers in the manufacturing sector, and the E-10 was for fisheries. Workers with E-9 visas felt that they were in a better position than those with E-10 visas because the type of work for E-10 visa holders was more complicated. The emergence of the migrant worker-student phenomenon was a hope to apply for a visa status transfer for scholars, for example, to become an E-7 Visa (skilled workers).

Modern society has a mobility system that allows individuals to carry out social mobility [30]. Social mobility in a community was often used to legitimize and simultaneously cover the reality of social inequality. Gaps were a natural reality due to a person's academic or professional achievements. Behind all that, various facts of social inequality affected a person's access to higher education as the primary means of obtaining vertical mobility.

Achievement in higher education was an essential factor in acquiring vertical social mobility. However, the facts showed that there were still obstacles to obtaining higher education caused by various social inequalities, such as socio-economic, geographical, and cultural inequalities in Indonesia.

However, it was not as simple as Miles' explanation that this open stratification was driven by the type of work and work performance. The industrialization has brought a pattern of mobility to modern society through the structure of work, allowing individuals to be placed in certain types of jobs with specific skills. A substantial factor driving social mobility was education. Education opens up job opportunities due to the correlation between education and the demands of the labor market [31].

In the case of Indonesian migrant workers-students in Korea, the mobility pattern occupied different spaces, which caused the emergence of hyper-social mobility for them. We borrowed the term "hyper-mobility" from Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. Hyperreality is a false reality believed to exceed objective reality [32]. Hyperreality presented models of existence as a simulation for the audience called simulacrum. This simulation was a process of representing the signs of reality, where the symbols replaced the object itself; as a result, the representation became more important than the object.
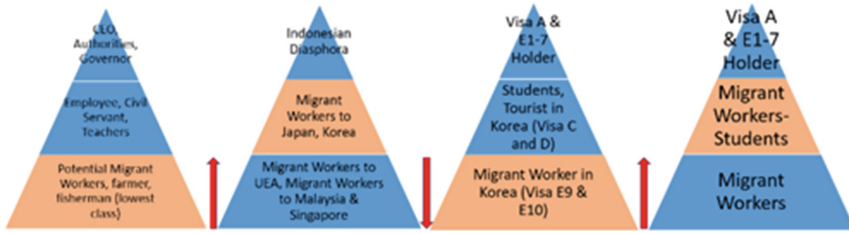
**Fig. 1.** The Dynamics of social mobility of Indonesian Migrant Worker.Students in Korea [33]

We used the term "hyper-mobility" to describe research findings on the dynamics of social mobility of Indonesian migrant workers-students. For example, in Indonesia, migrant workers or prospective migrant workers occupied the lower layers of social status in the community system as ordinary people or laborers/farmers. When they decided on their destination country, they felt they occupied higher positions in the context of prospective Indonesian migrant workers. Their feeling was due to a more complex and rigorous selection and examination process. When future migrant workers become migrant workers in Korea, they occupy a lower position in the setting of Korean society and the Indonesian diaspora. After becoming migrant worker-students, they returned to a higher level but were still not on par with the regular student diaspora.

From this analysis, it could be seen that mobility was indeed open, but this openness showed many obstacles, so high-mobility movements or jumps were challenging to do. It seemed as if there was an upward shift in social mobility among migrant workers-student, but this mobility was fictitious. The figure below describes the movement of the migrant workers-student.

Based on knowledge of positional space, one could carve out class in the logical sense of the word. A class was a group of agents occupying the same position under the same conditions (see Fig. 1). They were subjected to the same kind of conditioning, having every opportunity, inclination, and interest in common. Thus, they undertook similar practices and adopted the same attitudes. Class, in that sense, provided a theoretical existence that belonged to all theories as a product of explanatory classification by which one could explain and predict the practice and nature of such things.

However, Bourdieu (1992) argued that this was not a class. In the sense of being a group, the actual class was a group mobilized for struggle. One could say that this was a possible class so far as a set of agents that would place fewer objective obstacles in the mobilization effort than any other [34]. As constructed by Bourdieu, the social space model was a multidimensional arena where economic capital and cultural capitals were objects and weapons for competitive struggles between classes [35]. This condition allowed reconciliation between competing theories in modern society and those that explained the social world in the language of stratification with those who spoke the language of class struggle. Indonesian migrant workers-students could perceive significant differences, spontaneous differences that created perceptual categories. They considered that underlining incidental differences in students' lifestyles could be expressed by speaking, saying opinions, and managing activities. They accumulated symbolic capital. Symbolic capital was another name for distinguishing capital in any form when agents

perceived it with perceptual categories arising from the incorporation of its distribution structure; that is when it was known and recognized as self.

The truth of the social world was at stake in the battle between agents who were so unequipped to achieve absolutes, namely self-verification-vision and pre-vision. This symbolic struggle field was where representative professionals - in every sense of the term - faced each other in their debates about different areas of symbolic struggle. Those who occupied a dominant position in the social space were also in a dominant position in the field of symbolic production. It was unclear where they could obtain the necessary instruments of symbolic output to express their point of view on the social space [34].

## 3.3  Conclusion

An Indonesian migrant worker-student is a person who talks about a group, namely student-migrant workers, speaks on behalf of a group, quietly places the group's existence, and institutionalizes the group. The working class exists within and through a visible representative body of Indonesian migrant workers-student workers. Its existence and representation, based on affinity, objectively unite members of the same category as a group through the belief in its existence which is successfully implemented by the plenipotentiary body.

Thus, cultural capital refers to the dominant conception that directs what constitutes knowledge and social value through using a single standard of how to be knowledgeable. The education system reinforces the different attainment statuses of class groups. It continuously rewards its users, which is an implicit manifestation of the ideology of domination [36].

This research shows that although there is an increase in educational opportunities, it does not automatically make the credentials of Indonesian migrant workers capital in the labor market arena. They try to make their group (migrant workers) obtain higher educational qualifications but still do not provide job opportunities at the same pace.

This study also explains that the habitus of Indonesian migrant workers-students shows practices that do not place higher education as the primary goal. However, experiences in higher education and migration experiences give them new preferences about the habitus of the academic middle class.

On various levels, Indonesian migrant workers-students in Korea always try to climb the ladder of social mobility, but this social mobility appears false. In multiple arenas, migrant workers will always have a lower social status. Also, for example, they have accumulated economic capital from their income while working in Korea and cultural capital from the higher education they received. They still have to maintain their financial capital when they return to Indonesia with various efforts. Therefore, the struggle for capital will be a never-end struggle in the multiple arenas they face.

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