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Barriers to Belonging? Social (Im)Mobility of South Asian
Postgraduates in Vienna

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Abstract (English)

This thesis explores how structural and institutional conditions shape the transition of South Asian postgraduates in Vienna from academic qualification to labor market participation. Although international education is often framed as a pathway to upward mobility, this study critically examines how processes such as credential evaluation, bureaucratic regulation, and segmented labor markets create obstacles to both professional integration and social recognition. Through a qualitative research design centered on semi-structured interviews, the study explores how graduates navigate institutional filtering, cope with legal precarity, and construct personal strategies to secure employment and belonging. The analysis draws on conceptual perspectives of capital reconfiguration, differentiated pathways of integration, and the tension between mobility and immobility in contemporary migration regimes. By placing individual narratives within broader structures of governance and inequality, the thesis contributes to the understanding of how legal frameworks, institutional practices and social expectations interact to produce fragmented or suspended forms of mobility. It further highlights how the experience of being mobile does not necessarily lead to social inclusion or a stable sense of belonging.

Zusammenfassung (Deutsch)

Diese Masterarbeit analysiert, wie strukturelle und institutionelle Bedingungen den Übergang südasiatischer Postgraduierter vom Studienabschluss in den österreichischen Arbeitsmarkt beeinflussen. Obwohl internationale Hochschulbildung häufig als Katalysator für sozialen Aufstieg verstanden wird, zeigt die Untersuchung, wie Verfahren der Qualifikationsanerkennung, migrationsrechtliche Regelungen und eine segmentierte Arbeitsmarktstruktur den beruflichen Einstieg und die soziale Anerkennung erheblich erschweren. Im Rahmen eines qualitativen Forschungsdesigns mit halbstrukturierten Interviews wird untersucht, wie die Betroffenen institutionelle Hürden bewältigen, mit rechtlicher Unsicherheit umgehen und individuelle Strategien zur Sicherung von Zugehörigkeit und Beschäftigung entwickeln. Analytisch steht die Re-Konfiguration von Bildungskapital, die Differenzierung von Integrationsverläufen sowie das Spannungsverhältnis zwischen Mobilität und Immobilität in gegenwärtigen Migrationsregimen im Fokus. Die Arbeit leistet einen Beitrag zum Verständnis jener strukturellen Prozesse, die fragmentierte oder stagnierende Formen von Mobilität erzeugen, und zeigt auf, dass physische Mobilität nicht automatisch mit sozialer Teilhabe oder Zugehörigkeit einhergeht.

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1.Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Migration flows from the Global South to Western and Central Europe have intensified significantly in recent decades, fundamentally reshaping the demographic and socio-economic landscape of host societies. This phenomenon has prompted increased scholarly attention to the complex intersections of migration, social mobility and belonging, particularly as traditional frameworks of integration prove inadequate for understanding contemporary migration experiences. Among these migration flows, the movement of highly skilled individuals from South Asia to European capitals represents a particularly nuanced case study in the contradictions of modern migration.

The experiences of South Asian postgraduate students in Vienna illuminate a broader paradox within contemporary migration studies. Despite the European Union's stated commitment to attracting highly skilled migrants and Austria's specific policies designed to retain international graduates, many of these individuals find themselves navigating complex structural barriers that limit their full integration into Austrian society. This apparent disconnect between policy intentions and lived experiences raises fundamental questions about the nature of belonging, the valuation of cultural capital across national boundaries, and the effectiveness of current integration frameworks, which I aim to address and explore in my research

1.2 Research Relevance

Within the scope of this research, I aim to explore and focus specifically on the experiences of South Asian postgraduate students in Austria, a population that has received limited scholarly attention despite its growing significance. The study's relevance extends beyond academic inquiry to encompass pressing policy concerns about integration, skilled migration, and social cohesion in contemporary Europe.

The choice to focus on South Asian migrants is particularly significant given the growing importance of this population in European migration flows and the unique challenges they face.

The timing of this research is also significant, as it captures the experiences of migrants who have navigated both pre-pandemic and post-pandemic labor markets, providing insights into how global disruptions affect migrant integration processes. The study's findings will contribute to ongoing debates about the effectiveness of European migration policies and the need for more nuanced approaches to migrant integration.

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

In this research, I aim to explore the lived experiences of South Asian postgraduate students in Vienna as they transition from academic to professional life, with particular attention to how structural barriers shape their socio-economic mobility and sense of belonging. The research focuses to understand not only the challenges these individuals face but also the strategies they develop to navigate Austrian institutions and social structures.

The primary objective is to examine how institutional barriers, credential recognition processes, and labor market segmentation intersect to create specific challenges for South Asian migrants. This involves investigating the mechanisms through which cultural and economic capital are

valued, devalued, or transformed within Austrian contexts, and understanding how these processes affect migrants' professional trajectories and social integration.

A secondary objective is to analyze how Austrian immigration and integration policies shape the experiences of highly skilled South Asian migrants. This includes examining the gap between policy intentions and implementation, identifying areas where current frameworks may be inadequate, and understanding how policy structures interact with informal social processes to create or limit opportunities for migrant integration.

The study also aims to contribute to theoretical understanding of migration and belonging by examining how South Asian postgraduate students negotiate their identities and social positions within Austrian society. This involves exploring how transnational connections, cultural adaptation strategies, and professional aspirations interact to shape migrants' sense of belonging and their long-term integration outcomes.

1.4 Research Question

The central research question guiding this study is:

“How do South Asian postgraduate students in Austria encounter and negotiate potential barriers during the transitional period between graduation and employment and in what ways do immigration and integration policies, labour market regimes and credential recognition processes shape the translation of their cultural and economic capital into social mobility, recognition and belonging?”

This overarching question encompasses several secondary inquiries that will guide the research process. First, the study examines what specific structural barriers South Asian postgraduate students encounter as they transition from academic to professional life in Vienna, including issues of credential recognition, professional networking, and workplace integration.

Second, it investigates how these barriers interact with broader Austrian immigration and labor market policies to create particular challenges for highly skilled South Asian migrants. The research also explores how South Asian postgraduate students develop strategies to navigate these barriers and negotiate their professional and social identities within Austrian contexts.

This includes examining the role of transnational connections, community networks, and cultural adaptation in shaping integration outcomes. Finally, the study considers how these experiences contribute to or challenge migrants' sense of belonging in Austrian society and their long-term integration prospects.

1.5 Researcher Positionality

As an international student from India currently completing her Erasmus Mundus Master's in Global Studies at the University of Vienna, my position as a researcher is closely tied to the subject of this thesis. My background offers certain analytical and relational advantages, but it also calls for sustained reflexivity throughout the research process.

My shared regional and maybe educational background with participants, who also come from South Asia and are navigating the Austrian higher education and labor systems, can support deeper rapport and allow for more context-sensitive interview interactions. Having encountered similar bureaucratic and institutional challenges, I am able to pose more informed questions and interpret subtle nuances in the narratives shared by participants.

At the same time, I am aware that this proximity may introduce some methodological challenges. My personal experiences and assumptions may unintentionally shape how I interpret data or frame participant responses. It is also a possibility, that participants may tailor their narratives based on how they perceive my identity, either aligning with or distancing from my presumed experiences.

This dynamic is particularly relevant when interviewing participants from non-Indian backgrounds within South Asia, or those from different caste, class, gender, or linguistic positions. Therefore, even though we may share certain commonalities, I will definitely not overlook the intra-regional and social differences. To navigate this complexity, I approach the study with an intersectional lens which will eventually reflect in the interview design and analysis. It will actively consider how gender, caste, class, language, religion, and migration history intersect with experiences of (im)mobility and belonging.

I will attempt to remain attentive to how these categories shape participants' professional transitions and how different configurations of privilege and marginality emerge across cases. I also acknowledge the layered nature of my positionality. On one hand I occupy the dual role of researcher and on the other hand, that of a insider-outsider -an Indian international student in Vienna who may share some but not all aspects of participants' realities. I am aware that this could create tensions, particularly in terms of expectations, trust, or interpretation. Rather than viewing this as a limitation, I treat it as an ongoing site of reflexive engagement.

While I am situated within a transitional phase myself, between higher education and early career, I draw on this positional proximity not to generalize but to remain grounded in the empirical realities of those I seek to learn from. Ultimately, this research aims not only to contribute to academic knowledge but also to reflect responsibly on the lived experiences of the participants. I am mindful of avoiding extractive research practices and hope to create a study that holds relevance both within and beyond academic spaces.

1.6 Overview

This thesis has been structured across nine chapters that progressively build an understanding of how South Asian postgraduate students navigate the transition from education to employment in Austria, revealing the systematic nature of barriers and the structural mechanisms they encounter that eventually shape their experiences of mobility, recognition, and belonging. The thesis starts with an introduction, followed by a comprehensive summary of the existing scholarship surrounding this topic in the literature review.

In the third chapter, I introduce the theoretical frameworks through which this research analyzes participant experiences. This is followed by the methodology, which outlines the qualitative research approach employed in this study, detailing participant selection criteria and sampling strategies. This chapter explains the semi-structured interview design that allowed for both systematic data collection and responsive exploration of emerging themes, along with ethical considerations that guided the research process, particularly given my position as both researcher and member of the South Asian diaspora.

The fifth and sixth chapters are central to this research, as they present the major findings, analyzing the institutional and policy frameworks that shape South Asian migrants' experiences and the lived experiences of participants as they encounter and respond to structural barriers, respectively. Given the rich data gathered during the interview process, both these analytical chapters have been further divided into subchapters and subsections.

All of these findings are reflected upon in the seventh chapter, which synthesizes the research findings by examining three key themes that emerged from the analysis.

Finally, the thesis ends with a conclusion that brings together all analytical threads to provide a comprehensive response to the research question, followed by a section on implications for future research.

2. Literature Review

The intersection of migration, social mobility and belonging has emerged as a critical area of scholarly inquiry as global migration flows intensify, particularly involving migrants from the Global South to Europe. In the following literature review I've elaborated on the complex dynamics faced by skilled migrants with specific attention to South Asian postgraduates navigating Austrian institutional and social contexts. The aim of this review is to synthesize existing scholarship that I came across while conducting this research in order to understand how migrants (in this case, the non-EU students from South Asia) negotiate social hierarchies, transform their cultural capital and construct belonging in transnational settings.

Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework remains foundational for understanding how educational qualifications and cultural competencies operate within social fields and transform through migration processes. Bourdieu's identification of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital provides analytical tools for examining how migrants' resources are valued, devalued, or reconfigured within new institutional contexts. (Bourdieu, 1986)

Cultural capital, particularly in its institutionalized form as educational credentials, represents a crucial resource for skilled migrants. However, as Erel (2010, 645- 650) demonstrates, cultural capital is not simply portable across national boundaries but must be actively reworked and validated within new social fields. This process of "cultural capital validation" involves complex negotiations between migrants' existing qualifications and host country recognition systems, revealing the contingent nature of capital conversion across national contexts.

The concept of "capital conversion" becomes particularly significant for understanding how international students attempt to transform their educational investments into professional opportunities. Weiss (2005) shows how this conversion process is mediated by institutional gatekeepers, professional associations, and employers who may apply different criteria for

evaluating foreign qualifications. This mediation reveals how capital operates not as an objective measure of worth but as a socially constructed and contextually dependent resource.

Nieswand's (2011) influential work on the "status paradox of migration" provides crucial insights into how transnational migrants navigate dual identities and statuses across home and host countries. This paradox captures the experience of migrants who achieve socio-economic success in host countries while encountering social exclusion or ambiguous recognition, affecting their ability to belong fully in either context.

The status paradox operates through multiple mechanisms that complicate simple narratives of migration success. Migrants may experience simultaneous upward mobility in economic terms while facing downward mobility in social recognition, creating complex negotiations of identity and belonging. This dynamic is particularly acute for highly educated migrants whose qualifications may be formally recognized but socially devalued through subtle forms of discrimination and exclusion.

Contemporary scholars like Cederberg (2015) and Ryan and Mulholland (2015) have extended this analysis by examining how migrants adapt their cultural capital in host countries and develop networking strategies to navigate professional environments. Their work reveals the active, strategic dimension of capital conversion while highlighting the structural constraints that limit migrants' agency in these processes.

Portes and Zhou's (1993) theory of segmented assimilation provides another crucial framework for understanding how varying experiences of integration shape migrants' socio-economic outcomes and sense of belonging. This theory challenges linear models of assimilation by recognizing that migrants may follow different pathways depending on factors such as ethnic community resources, host society reception, and family structure.

The segmented assimilation framework is particularly relevant for understanding South Asian postgraduates' experiences because it recognizes how group characteristics, reception contexts, and individual agency interact to produce different integration outcomes. Some migrants may achieve rapid mainstream integration, others may maintain strong ethnic community ties while achieving economic success, and still others may experience downward assimilation into marginalized segments of society.

Levitt's (1998) concept of social remittances talks about the transfer of norms and practices across borders and further complicates these integration processes by showing how transnational connections influence local integration strategies. Social remittances flow in multiple directions, affecting both migrants' adaptation to host societies and their continued connections to origin communities, creating complex negotiations of loyalty, identity, and belonging.

2.1 Legal Frameworks and Institutional Barriers

In order to understand the differentiated forms of exclusion and inclusion, De Genova's (2010, 22-24) work on "migrant illegality" is helpful because it demonstrates how legal status operates not as a binary condition but as a spectrum of precarious positions actively produced through state policies and practices. Moreover, Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013, 23-24) concept of "differential inclusion" extends this analysis by capturing how contemporary migration regimes simultaneously include and exclude migrants through various mechanisms of stratification. Their work reveals how skilled migration programs, while ostensibly welcoming, often create hierarchical forms of belonging that privilege certain types of migrants while marginalizing others. For South Asian postgraduates in Austria, this differential inclusion manifests through visa categories that provide legal presence while maintaining precarious conditions for long-term settlement.

Morris's (2002, 50 - 52) concept of "stratified rights" provides additional insights for understanding how legal status creates differential access to social, economic, and political rights. International students and recent graduates occupy particular positions within these hierarchies, possessing certain rights while being excluded from others, creating specific vulnerabilities and opportunities that shape integration trajectories.

2.2 Liminal Legality and Temporal Precarity

Cecilia Menjívar's (2006) concept of "liminal legality" has proven particularly influential for understanding migrants who exist in gray zones between legal and illegal status. Liminal legality captures the condition of migrants who possess legal authorization to remain but whose status remains temporary, conditional, and vulnerable to revocation. This concept is especially relevant for international students and graduates whose legal status depends on maintaining specific conditions such as enrollment, employment, or income levels. The temporal dimensions of liminal legality are crucial for understanding how legal precarity shapes migrants' daily experiences and long-term planning abilities. Menjívar's (2006) demonstrates how temporally limited legal status creates "enforced present-orientedness" that constrains migrants' ability to invest in long-term integration activities. For South Asian postgraduates, the transition from student visas to work permits creates particular temporal pressures that may force suboptimal career decisions.

Griffiths (2014) extends this analysis by examining how temporal uncertainty affects migrants' psychological well-being and social integration. The constant possibility of status loss creates chronic stress and anxiety that can undermine integration efforts even when migrants are technically legally present, revealing the psychological dimensions of legal precarity. The governance of international student migration within the European Union reflects broader tensions between economic needs, security concerns, and political pressures around migration control. King and Raghuram's (2013) analysis reveals how European policies increasingly view

international students as potential skilled migrants, leading to frameworks that encourage post-study retention while maintaining restrictive conditions.

Austria's implementation of EU Directive 2016/801 through its Red-White-Red Card system reflects what Kahanec and Zimmermann (2011) term "selective migration policies" that aim to attract skilled migrants while maintaining control over numbers and conditions. However, as Hercog and Sandu (2018) demonstrate, national implementation varies significantly across European countries, creating uneven opportunities that may influence migrants' destination choices and mobility strategies.

2.3 Labor Market Integration and Professional Recognition

One of the central themes of this research was to explore the translation of cultural capital and the role of the formal recognition of foreign qualifications represents a crucial mechanism through which cultural capital is validated or devalued within host country contexts. Schomburg and Teichler's (2011) comprehensive analysis of European credential recognition systems reveals significant variations in procedures, criteria, and outcomes across countries and professional fields, highlighting the institutional complexity that skilled migrants must navigate. Nohl et al. (2014) demonstrate that formal credential recognition often represents only the first step in a longer process of professional validation. Their research demonstrates how migrants may achieve formal qualification recognition while still experiencing devaluation of their expertise within labor markets, illustrating the gap between bureaucratic recognition and social acceptance of foreign qualifications.

Labor market segmentation theory provides crucial insights into how labor markets are divided into distinct segments with different employment conditions and advancement opportunities. Doeringer and Piore's (1971) foundational work distinguish between primary labor markets characterized by stable employment and good wages, and secondary labor markets featuring unstable employment and limited advancement prospects.

International students and recent graduates may find themselves channeled into secondary labor markets despite their qualifications, due to factors such as legal status restrictions, employer perceptions, or lack of local networks. Kalleberg's (2000) analysis of "non-standard employment" reveals how temporary contracts and part-time work may disproportionately affect workers with precarious legal status, limiting long-term career development opportunities.

The phenomenon of skills underutilization among skilled migrants has received extensive scholarly attention. Chiswick and Miller (2009, 162- 169) identify factors such as credential non-recognition, language barriers, and discrimination as key explanatory variables for occupational downgrading. For international students, skills underutilization may be particularly acute during the immediate post-graduation period when visa timelines create pressure to accept any available employment.

The conversion of educational capital into employment opportunities depends not only on formal recognition procedures but also on employer perceptions and labor market signaling mechanisms. Zschirnt and Ruedin's (2016) meta-analysis of field experiments reveals significant discrimination against job applicants with foreign-sounding names across European labor markets, suggesting that credential recognition alone may not ensure equal employment opportunities.

Research on employer attitudes toward international qualifications reveals complex patterns of evaluation that may disadvantage graduates from certain regions or institutions. Hawthorne (2008) shows how employer familiarity with foreign education systems affects hiring decisions, with graduates from well-known institutions receiving more favorable treatment. For South Asian postgraduates, these signaling processes may be particularly challenging given the diversity of educational systems across the region and potential employer unfamiliarity with specific institutions.

2.4 Social Integration, Discrimination, and Belonging

The experiences of racialized migrants in Europe cannot be understood without attention to how structural and interpersonal racism shapes integration opportunities and belonging processes. Essed's (1991) pioneering work on "everyday racism" reveals how seemingly minor incidents of exclusion and marginalization accumulate to create significant barriers to full social participation. Additionally, the concept of "new racism" developed by Barker (1981) helps explain how discrimination may operate through cultural rather than biological logics while maintaining exclusionary effects, particularly affecting South Asian migrants through perceived cultural differences or linguistic competencies. Ahmed's (2000) influential work on performative belonging reveals how migrants are often compelled to demonstrate their fitness for inclusion through various forms of cultural performance. These performances may include adopting local dress styles, linguistic practices, or social behaviours while potentially suppressing aspects of their cultural backgrounds that are viewed as non-conforming. Probyn's (1996) emphasizes how belonging processes are never complete or final but require constant repetition and validation. For South Asian graduates, performative belonging may involve complex negotiations between professional requirements, social expectations, and personal cultural identities that can be emotionally and psychologically demanding.

Carling and Schewel's (2017) framework distinguishing between migration aspirations and capabilities provides important insights into how structural constraints and individual agency interact to shape mobility outcomes. For South Asian postgraduates, the relationship between aspirations and capabilities may shift significantly during their transition from student to professional status, with initial aspirations for permanent settlement potentially modified by experiences of barriers and constraints. The phenomenon of onward migration—movement from initial destination countries to third destinations—represents strategic responses to integration barriers rather than simply failed integration attempts. The European Union's

internal mobility provisions create particular opportunities for onward migration within Europe once migrants obtain long-term residence, influencing initial destination choices and integration strategies. The growth of transnational career opportunities may create new possibilities for skilled migrants to leverage their international educational experiences without necessarily requiring permanent settlement in destination countries.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The complex experiences of South Asian postgraduate students in Vienna require a multifaceted theoretical approach that can capture the intersections of migration, social mobility, capital transformation, and belonging. This chapter presents the theoretical and conceptual framework that guides this research, drawing from several complementary but distinct theoretical traditions to understand how structural barriers shape migrants' professional integration and social mobility.

The framework presented here integrates five primary theoretical perspectives: theory of capital (Bourdieu, 1986), segmented assimilation theory (Portes & Zhou, 1993), the status paradox of migration (Nieswand, 2011), social remittances theory (Levitt, 1988) and concepts of spatialized slowness and temporal (im)mobility (Menard, 2020).

I have not just simply juxtaposed these theories together but have attempted to integrate them to create a coherent and more inclusive analytical framework that can illuminate different aspects of South Asian postgraduates' experiences while maintaining theoretical consistency.

3.1 Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Capital

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital provides a fundamental framework for understanding how resources and advantages operate in social contexts and how they may be transformed, devalued, or enhanced through migration. Bourdieu (1986) identifies four distinct but interrelated forms of capital: economic capital (financial resources), cultural capital (education, skills, cultural knowledge), social capital (networks and relationships), and symbolic capital (prestige and recognition).

For South Asian postgraduate students, the migration process involves complex transformations in all four forms of capital. Their cultural capital, accumulated through educational achievements and professional training, may face devaluation or non-recognition within

Austrian institutional contexts. The convertibility of this capital, its ability to generate returns in terms of employment, income, or social status becomes a central concern in their integration process.

Economic capital, while important, takes on particular significance in migration contexts due to visa requirements, job search periods, and potential periods of underemployment. The transformation of economic capital is often closely linked to the recognition of cultural capital, as credential non recognition can lead to economic losses and reduced bargaining power in labor markets.

Social capital presents perhaps the most complex challenges for South Asian postgraduates. Their existing networks, often concentrated within academic or diaspora communities, may provide limited access to mainstream Austrian professional networks. The development of new social capital requires time, cultural competence, and often depends on the recognition of cultural capital by potential network members.

Symbolic capital, the recognition and prestige accorded to individuals based on their other forms of capital, often proves most resistant to transfer. The symbolic violence embedded in non-recognition of credentials or the devaluation of foreign experience reflects deeper power structures that privilege certain forms of knowledge and experience over others.

For South Asian postgraduates, capital reconstruction involves multiple strategies: seeking credential recognition through official channels, developing new social networks through professional associations or cultural organizations, and acquiring Austria-specific cultural capital through language learning or professional development programs. These strategies require time, resources, and cultural competence, and their success depends partly on the receptiveness of Austrian institutions and social networks.

The concept of "capital at stake" helps explain why certain barriers to capital conversion can be particularly frustrating or demoralizing for highly skilled migrants. Having invested significant time and resources in acquiring cultural capital, the failure to convert this capital in new contexts can represent not just economic loss but also threats to identity and self-worth.

Nowicka (2015) has further developed this analysis by examining how social capital operates differently in migration contexts, arguing that transnational social capital can be both a resource and a constraint. While diaspora networks can provide crucial support and information, over-reliance on these networks may also limit access to mainstream social capital and professional opportunities.

3.2 Segmented Assimilation Theory

Segmented assimilation theory, developed by Portes and Zhou (1993), challenges linear models of immigrant integration by demonstrating that different groups follow different pathways of incorporation into host societies. This theory identifies three possible outcomes: assimilation into the mainstream middle class, assimilation into the underclass, and selective assimilation that maintains strong ethnic ties while achieving economic mobility. For highly skilled migrants like South Asian postgraduates, segmented assimilation theory helps explain why similar levels of human capital can lead to vastly different integration outcomes. Factors such as the mode of incorporation (how migrants are received by host societies), the strength of ethnic communities, and the structure of opportunities in host societies all influence integration pathways. The theory's emphasis on the "mode of incorporation" is particularly relevant for understanding South Asian postgraduates' experiences in Austria.

Unlike refugees or family reunification migrants, student migrants are generally received positively and have access to institutional support through universities. However, this positive

reception may not extend to the post-graduation job search period, when they must compete with Austrian and EU nationals for employment.

The concept of "selective assimilation" offers important insights into how highly skilled migrants may maintain transnational connections while pursuing integration. Rather than viewing ethnic ties as obstacles to integration, this perspective recognizes how these connections can provide resources, support, and alternative pathways to mobility. Segmented assimilation theory emphasizes the role of structural factors in shaping integration outcomes.

For South Asian postgraduates in Austria, relevant structural factors include immigration policies, labor market regulations, credential recognition procedures, and institutional practices within universities and employers. The theory's attention to "opportunity structures" helps explain why similar migrants may experience different outcomes depending on their field of study, timing of graduation, or geographic location within Austria.

Fields with labor shortages or international orientations may provide more opportunities for non-EU graduates, while others may remain relatively closed to foreign-trained professionals. Institutional discrimination, while often subtle, can create significant barriers to upward mobility. This may manifest through hiring practices that favor Austrian or EU nationals, networking practices that exclude foreign-trained professionals, or workplace cultures that fail to recognize different cultural competencies.

For South Asian postgraduates, the extension of segmented assimilation theory helps explain the paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion that many experience. They may be included in academic or professional contexts while remaining excluded from broader social networks or recognition. This partial inclusion can create particular frustrations as it suggests that barriers are not simply about qualification levels but involve more subtle forms of discrimination or exclusion.

3.3 Conceptualizing the Status Paradox

Boris Nieswand's (2011) concept of the "status paradox of migration" provides a crucial framework for understanding the contradictions experienced by highly skilled migrants who achieve professional success while remaining socially marginalized. The status paradox captures the simultaneous experience of upward economic mobility and continued social exclusion that characterizes many skilled migration experiences.

For South Asian postgraduates, the status paradox manifests in multiple ways: obtaining advanced degrees from prestigious universities while struggling to find employment commensurate with their qualifications; achieving professional success while remaining excluded from informal networks and social recognition; or earning good incomes while experiencing discrimination or cultural marginalization in daily life.

The status paradox helps explain why traditional metrics of integration such as employment rates, income levels, or educational attainment may obscure more subtle forms of exclusion and marginalization. A South Asian graduate who obtains employment in their field may still experience the status paradox if their work is undervalued, their expertise is questioned, or they remain excluded from professional networks and advancement opportunities.

This concept is particularly important for understanding the emotional and psychological dimensions of skilled migration. The status paradox can create feelings of frustration, confusion, and alienation as migrants struggle to reconcile their sense of their own qualifications and capabilities with the recognition they receive from host societies. The status paradox operates through several interconnected mechanisms that create contradictions between objective achievements and social recognition.

Credential devaluation represents one key mechanism, where foreign qualifications are formally recognized but informally discounted or viewed as inferior to domestic credentials.

Professional segregation represents another mechanism, where migrants may obtain employment in their fields but remain concentrated in particular sectors, organizations, or roles that are perceived as less prestigious or offer limited advancement opportunities.

This segregation may be subtle and difficult to document but can significantly limit long-term career prospects. Cultural devaluation involves the systematic undervaluing of cultural competencies, languages, or international experience that migrants bring to host societies. While these competencies may be valuable in globalized professional environments, they may not be recognized or rewarded within local contexts that privilege domestic experience and cultural knowledge.

Social exclusion from informal networks represents perhaps the most subtle but significant mechanism of the status paradox. Professional advancement often depends not just on formal qualifications but on access to informal networks, mentorship relationships, and social capital that may remain difficult for migrants to access regardless of their professional achievements.

3.4 Social Remittances Theory

Peggy Levitt's (1998) concept of "social remittances" provides crucial insights into how transnational connections shape migrants' integration processes and sense of belonging. Social remittances encompass the flow of ideas, practices, identities, and social capital across borders, representing a form of cultural circulation that accompanies and sometimes rivals economic remittances.

For South Asian postgraduates, social remittances operate in multiple directions and serve various functions. They may receive social remittances from family and community networks that provide guidance, support, and resources for navigating Austrian contexts. Simultaneously, they may send social remittances back to origin communities through sharing their experiences, knowledge, and new perspectives acquired through migration. Social remittances can include

practical information about job searching, credential recognition, or bureaucratic procedures, but they also encompass broader cultural and social knowledge about how to navigate Austrian professional and social contexts.

This knowledge is often tacit and experiential, requiring ongoing communication and relationship maintenance to access effectively. The concept of social remittances helps explain how migrants maintain connections to origin communities while adapting to new contexts. Rather than viewing transnational connections as obstacles to integration, this perspective recognizes how these connections can provide resources, alternative pathways to mobility, and sources of identity and belonging that complement rather than compete with local integration.

For South Asian postgraduates, social remittances may provide access to cultural resources, professional networks, and forms of recognition that are not available within Austrian contexts. These alternative sources of validation and belonging can help migrants maintain self-esteem and identity coherence while navigating challenges in host societies. However, social remittances can also create tensions and conflicts as migrants negotiate between different sets of expectations, values, and opportunities. Family expectations transmitted through social remittances may conflict with local opportunities or requirements, creating stress and difficult choices for migrants.

3.5 Spatialized Slowness and Temporal (Im)mobility

The concept of "spatialized slowness," developed by Ménard (2020), provides important insights into how temporal factors shape migration experiences in ways that may not be captured by traditional mobility frameworks. This concept recognizes that migration involves not just spatial movement but also temporal dimensions that can create particular forms of constraint and opportunity.

For South Asian postgraduates, spatialized slowness manifests in various ways, for example visa timelines that create pressure for rapid job searching, credential recognition processes that can take months or years, and professional advancement that may be slower than expected due to various barriers. These temporal constraints can create particular forms of stress and limit strategic options available to migrants.

The concept helps explain why highly skilled migrants may experience their migration as involving periods of stagnation or blocked mobility despite their qualifications and efforts. Rather than viewing these experiences as individual failures, the framework recognizes how institutional and structural factors create temporal barriers that may be beyond individual control.

Temporal (im)mobility also involves the ways in which migrants' time horizons and planning abilities may be constrained by uncertainty about visa status, employment prospects, or long-term settlement possibilities. This uncertainty can make it difficult to invest in long-term relationship building, skill development, or other activities that might facilitate integration.

The temporal dimensions of migration are particularly shaped by visa regimes and immigration policies that create specific timeframes and deadlines for different phases of the migration process. For South Asian postgraduates, the transition from student visas to work permits or longer-term residence permits creates particular temporal pressures that can significantly shape their experiences. Student visa timelines typically provide limited time for job searching after graduation, creating pressure to accept positions quickly rather than waiting for optimal opportunities.

This temporal pressure can lead to underemployment or acceptance of positions that do not fully utilize migrants' qualifications, contributing to the status paradox discussed earlier. The uncertainty associated with visa renewals and status changes can also create what might be termed "temporal precarity" a condition where migrants' ability to make long-term plans is

compromised by uncertainty about their legal status and residence rights. This precarity can affect not just employment decisions but also relationship formation, housing choices, and investment in language learning or other integration activities.

Understanding these temporal constraints is crucial for recognizing why traditional integration metrics may be inadequate for assessing highly skilled migrants' experiences. Success in integration may require time horizons that extend beyond the timeframes allowed by current visa regimes, creating structural barriers to full integration regardless of individual motivation or capability.

The concept of temporal (im)mobility also applies to professional development and career trajectories, where highly skilled migrants may experience periods of stagnation or lateral movement that differ from their pre-migration expectations. These experiences may not be captured by simple measures of employment or income but may significantly affect migrants' sense of progress and belonging.

Professional temporal (im)mobility can result from various factors: credential recognition delays that postpone entry into appropriate employment, networking requirements that take time to develop, or cultural learning that is necessary for professional advancement. These factors can create career trajectories that involve periods of apparent stagnation followed by rapid advancement, or alternatively, long-term plateaus that may not reflect migrants' actual capabilities.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in the assumption that the lived experiences of South Asian postgraduates navigating the Austrian labor market are best understood through open-ended, dialogic engagement. Rather than testing a hypothesis in this research, I seek to explore how structural barriers, bureaucratic systems, and institutional norms shape trajectories of (im)mobility, social recognition and belonging. Hence, a qualitative design allows me to go for narrative depth and reflexive co-construction of meaning with participants.

Following the qualitative research design guide by Maxwell (2005), my approach while conducting this qualitative analysis relied on the interview transcripts, observational notes, various institutional and policy documents as references and the interview audio recordings.

Based on the ethnographic approaches particularly Skinner's (2018) "interview-as encounter" model and Spradley's descriptive questioning technique this methodology enables participants to share stories in their own terms while still guided by thematic coherence. For conducting the interviews, I relied on the biographical narrative method developed by Schütze. Considering the research topic, it was important for me, that the interview participants felt at ease during the process and hence let them decide their preferred location. This generated a certain level of comfort and mutual understanding between me in the role of a researcher and interviewer and them as participants. (Skinner 2012, 108).

The interview protocol began with the outlining of the study's overarching themes while emphasizing the participant's autonomy in narrative construction. Interviewees were informed that their life story may encompass any experiences or events that have contributed to their current identity and personal development. (Ibid.)

The nature of qualitative interviews presents additional methodological considerations. While these interactions are frequently characterized as conversational, Rapley argues that despite

their 'conversational' qualities, interviews cannot be considered 'naturally occurring' conversations due to the different behavioral patterns participants exhibit in interview versus everyday conversational contexts (Rapley 2003).

4.1 Participant Selection and Sampling Strategy

The target group consists of four South Asian postgraduates who have completed a master's degree at an Austrian university within the last five years. These individuals are either currently navigating the labor market or have recently transitioned into employment. The participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling using personal networks, student and alumni groups, digital communities and South Asian cultural organizations in Vienna. The selection process was conducted keeping in mind to reflect diversity across academic fields, gender identities, caste/class backgrounds and legal statuses. This diversity was especially crucial to support the study's intersectional lens and its concern with how multiple forms of marginality and privilege shape post-migration experiences. Given the timeframe,

4.2 Interview Design and Structure

Semi-structured interviews form the core of this study's data collection strategy. Each interview was conducted between approximately 60 -90 minutes in length. Out of the four interviews, only one was conducted via the Zoom video conferencing application, as the participant was travelling. The rest were conducted in various cafes in the city of Vienna, which the participants themselves had chosen according to their convenience. The interviews are conducted in English, with sensitivity to participants' comfort in switching terms or expressions from other languages (Hindi, Urdu) when necessary.

The interview was structured in three parts: background and transition experiences; encounters with institutional systems (e.g., visa, job search, credential recognition); and reflections on belonging, identity, and aspiration. Questions are guided but open, allowing for the emergence of unanticipated themes.

In response to feedback from an academic workshop, I requested the participants to bring five personal belongings that they associated with their home country, identity or current host country. The reason being: These symbolic items may act as elicitation devices that deepen discussion of identity, memory and belonging in material and emotional terms, an approach inspired by Spradley's descriptive prompts and Skinner's emphasis on materiality in ethnographic interviews. (Skinner 2012, 132)

4.3 Data Analysis

All interviews are audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed, and analyzed using thematic coding. The analysis proceeds in three stages: open coding of recurring ideas and terms, axial coding to group patterns, and cross-case comparison to explore variations by field, gender, or migration status. This was done with the help of the MAXQDA software.

Supplementary data, including relevant Austrian policy documents, career services reports, and legal texts on residency and employment, are also analyzed to contextualize individual narratives within broader institutional structures. This document-based analysis complements the interview data and supports triangulation. In addition to formal transcripts, I plan to maintain a reflexive field journal to record the atmosphere of each interview, observing non-verbal cues, pauses, hesitations, spatial dynamics, and my own emotional responses. This epilogue-style documentation is not formally coded but supports reflective interpretation of the data. (also based on feedback from the workshop)

4.4 Introducing the Participants

The four participants in this study represent a small population of the many South Asian postgraduate students who have navigated the Austrian higher education system and are currently experiencing the transition into professional life. To protect participant confidentiality, all names used in this research are pseudonyms and certain identifying details have been modified while maintaining the integrity of their experiences and narratives. All of the participants have completed their respective master's degrees from Austrian universities, which was also the prerequisite for this research.

Mario, a 28-year-old from Pakistan, currently works in the catering business while simultaneously pursuing a PhD. As an international scholarship holder, Mario identifies as a queer person. His current focus is on maintaining employment and advancing his academic credentials to secure long-term residency while building professional qualifications.

Anna, from India, currently divides her time between working in the gastro industry and pursuing voluntary work in museums and history-related fields. As an international scholarship holder, Anna identifies as a Muslim woman. She engages with voluntary work in cultural institutions to seek professional development opportunities outside traditional employment pathways and also to cater to her own passion for art and history.

Ava, a 34-year-old from India, works for an international organization and leads a transnational lifestyle, shuttling between the UK and Vienna for both professional and personal reasons. She identifies as Hindu and has been the recipient of various scholarships throughout her academic career.

Farah, from Pakistan, currently works in the gastro industry and identifies as a practicing Muslim woman with strong spiritual commitments. As an international scholarship holder, her

experiences provide insightful perspectives on how religious identity and her being a woman intersect with professional navigation and social integration within Austrian contexts.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in adherence to comprehensive ethical according to the GDPR. The ethical framework implemented draws upon established principles in qualitative research while addressing the specific challenges posed by autobiographical storytelling approaches.

Informed Consent and Participant Rights

All participants received comprehensive information about the study's objectives, methodology, and potential implications through both written documentation and verbal explanation prior to their involvement (Driessen 1998; Spradley and Rynkiewicz 1976). All the individual were informed of the voluntary nature of participation, and were explicitly informed that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any stage without consequence or explanation

Anonymity and Confidentiality Challenges

While maintaining participant anonymity represents standard practice in social science research (Driessen 1998; Spradley and Rynkiewicz 1976), the implementation of biographical narrative methodology presents particular challenges to traditional anonymization approaches. To address these concerns, pseudonymization procedures were implemented across all research materials. The interview transcripts contain only pseudonyms and potentially identifiable information, including specific institutional names, geographical details, and unique biographical markers, was systematically removed or altered. However, participants were made aware of the inherent limitations in anonymity guarantees given the detailed nature of biographical narratives, ensuring transparency about potential risks.

4.5 Limitations and Challenges

In maintaining transparency and reflexivity throughout this research process, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations and challenges encountered during data collection and analysis. These limitations do not diminish the validity of the findings but rather provide important context for understanding the scope and applicability of this study.

Scope and Participant Selection

The decision to focus specifically on South Asian postgraduate students was informed by several practical and methodological considerations. Primarily, this choice reflected my own capacity for recruitment through existing networks, available time constraints, cultural and linguistic familiarity that could facilitate deeper interviews, and the identified gap in research representation for this particular population. While this focus enabled in-depth exploration of specific experiences, it necessarily limited the breadth of perspectives included in the study.

It is important to emphasize that the experiences documented in this research are not unique to South Asian migrants. The structural barriers, institutional discrimination, and integration challenges identified through these interviews likely affect international students from various non-EU countries, though potentially in different configurations depending on factors such as country of origin, visa categories, and racialized perceptions. The choice to focus on South Asian experiences should be understood as providing a detailed case study of broader systematic issues rather than suggesting these challenges are exclusive to this population.

Recruitment Challenges and Geographic Representation

Initially, I aimed to include participants from a broader range of South Asian countries, including Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan, in addition to India and Pakistan.

This would have provided greater diversity of perspectives and experiences within the South Asian diaspora. However, practical constraints including time limitations, logistical challenges, and participant availability ultimately shaped the final composition of the study. The participants who confirmed their availability and commitment to the research process were prioritized to ensure the quality and completion of data collection within the thesis timeline.

This limitation means that certain national perspectives and migration pathways within South Asia remain underrepresented in this study. Future research would benefit from more systematic efforts to include voices from across the South Asian region, recognizing that migration experiences may vary significantly based on factors such as passport strength, bilateral agreements between countries, and specific racialized perceptions of different national groups.

Representativeness and Avoiding Generalizations

The experiences documented in this research represent a specific subset of South Asian postgraduate students in Vienna and should not be interpreted as universal experiences shared by all individuals from this background. Vienna hosts hundreds of South Asian postgraduate students, each navigating unique combinations of personal circumstances, academic disciplines, visa statuses, and social networks. The four participants in this study provide valuable insights into common structural barriers and institutional challenges, but their experiences cannot be assumed to represent the full diversity of outcomes within this population.

Throughout the analysis, I have made deliberate efforts to avoid cherry-picking experiences that support predetermined conclusions, instead presenting the complexity and variation within participant narratives. Where participants reported different experiences or outcomes, these variations have been acknowledged and analyzed rather than minimized. The goal has been to

identify patterns and systematic issues while respecting the individuality of each participant's journey.

5. Structural Constraints and Institutional Landscapes

The transition from higher education to professional employment represents a critical juncture in the migration trajectories of international students, particularly for those from non-EU countries who must navigate complex institutional frameworks while pursuing economic integration and social belonging in their host societies. Hence, in this chapter I aim to situate the experiences of the interview participants with the various Austrian policy architectures, in order to understand effects, the practical implementations or lack thereof, have on this specific group of non-EU post-graduates with a South Asian background.

Through this lens, I aim to identify specific areas where current institutional frameworks prove inadequate in addressing the complex realities faced by non-EU graduates, while simultaneously examining how formal policy structures interact with informal social processes. Since these either create meaningful opportunities for migrant integration or systematically limit such possibilities.

To give a brief overview of what this chapter entails, I start with synthesizing policy documents, administrative guidelines and academic perspectives with the empirical findings from my fieldwork. The legal insecurity, institutional filtering mechanisms and socio-cultural discrimination together operate in a complex interplay, which I characterize as precarious pathways for non-EU graduates in this paper. This lies in contrast against the backdrop Austria officially has put forth ambitious policy goals of attracting and retaining international talent through various strategic initiatives, which has been documented by the European Migration Network Austria (2019), OECD reports (2014) and theoretical frameworks developed by scholars such as Bourdieu (1986) regarding cultural and social capital conversion in migration contexts.

Even though Austria strategically positions itself as an attractive destination for global talent through programmes such as the Red-White-Red Card system and various skilled migration

initiatives, the actual institutional practices and bureaucratic procedures create what De Genova (2010) conceptualizes as "bordered inclusion" - a condition characterized by legal admission that is simultaneously accompanied by ongoing conditionalities that sustain precarity rather than facilitate genuine integration. (De Genova, 4-9) This analytical framework proves particularly valuable in understanding how South Asian graduates experience formal inclusion within Austrian society while remaining subject to various forms of institutional marginalization and structural vulnerability. In this section, I start with the initial stages of the application of the residence permit by the non-EU international students based on the experiences of the selected interview participants from south Asian countries like India and Pakistan. I feel the need to bring these initial experiences to light as the pathway to enter the Austrian Labor market systematically and structurally already starts here.

5.1 Migration and Labour Market Regimes: Selective Openness and Restrictive Practices

Austria's migration regime is embedded within the broader European context shaped by Directive (EU) 2016/801, which mandates that international students must be allowed to remain in the host country for a minimum of nine months after graduation to seek work or establish a business. Austria exceeds this minimum by offering a twelve-month job-seeking extension (Migration.gv.at 2024). This framework represents a selective form of openness, designed to attract skilled graduates while simultaneously filtering access through bureaucratic requirements.

Even though the thesis and chapter focuses on the transition period between the post-graduation and entering the Austrian labour market for the non-eu international students, I would like to highlight the experiences of the interview participants before entering Austria to pursue their masters degrees as this form of migration regimes and the different kinds of structural bureaucracies already begin at the initial stage of applying for the resident permit and the visa, which the interview participants also brought up when asked about how they navigated these

different structures. I also think it's vital for my research as it shows the initial stage of one of their many statuses as non-EU international students and how it gradually has to go through different filters.

The migration regime begins its filtering process at the embassy level, where these prospective students have their initial encounter with the first structural barriers. Unlike other EU states, the non-eu international students don't require a blocked account, however need to produce a proof of sufficient funds in a Austrian bank account while applying for their student residence permit.

“Proof of sufficient financial means to cover the living costs [as of 2025]:

- Students under 24 years of age: EUR 703.58/month
- Students as of the age of 24: EUR 1,273.99/month
- Couples: EUR 2,009.85/month for both
- For each child additionally: EUR 196,57/month

Applicants must prove these funds for twelve months in advance, and the funds must be held in a foreign savings book or bank account bearing the applicant's name and accessible from Austria (OEAD, 2025).

Based on the experiences shared from the interview participants during the interviews, this particular requirement creates a significant financial burden that disproportionately affect students from South Asia, where currency disparities magnify the economic barriers to entry. As Ava noted regarding her experience with her university programme:

"(...)There is also this thing... this block account, I don't know if it still existed or not, that you have to have a certain amount of money in your account, which is little too high for the students... for the people who were in a partial scholarship or who were studying with a loan or their parents are sponsoring them, for them, it was pretty daunting and traumatic." (Ava. 07:58-14:39)

This financial gatekeeping mechanism exemplifies what Bourdieu (1986) identifies as the conversion of economic capital into educational opportunities, creating systematic exclusions based on class background rather than academic merit. This “sufficient funds” requirement effectively creates a tiered system where only those with substantial financial resources can access Austrian higher education, despite scholarship availability.

Mario’s experience illustrates both the potential for smooth bureaucratic processes and their inherent unpredictability:

"I will say, though surprisingly, the Austrian process so far has been fairly smooth, actually... it helped that I have a scholarship, because I think if we don't have when you, have to prove a certain amount of funds and you have to kind of like do more like work... I think having the scholarship was a big help because they've reduced kind of the scrutiny on my application."
(Mario 7:36 – 8:13)

However, this apparent smoothness can also be understood as contingent under very specific circumstances, scholarship status, timing and institutional capacity. This contrast between different bureaucratic offices becomes quite evident when Mario compared experiences:

"Because for the red white red, you have to apply another business immigration office, which is like black and white from the normal MA35 office... The business immigration office was by worlds apart from that, like it was everyone was fairly nice to be honest... It felt like the most humane kind of probably residence permit of life for in a while." (Mario 28:13-28:59)

This differential treatment within the same institutional framework creates varied experiences of state power, where some offices provide "humane" treatment while others are characterised by hostility and inefficiency.

5.2 The Red-White-Red Card Paradox

As these individuals then proceeded to enter the Austrian labor market, either while pursuing their studies to support themselves financially and, or after graduating from their respective Austrian universities in Vienna, they encountered the next step – applying for the red-white-red card.¹ An individual can only apply for the RWR only after having successfully completed their graduation degree, in the case of the interview participants their respective master's degrees. The Red-White-Red (RWR) Card, which was introduced in 2011 encompasses Austria's demand-driven model of migration, providing a privileged pathway for Austrian university graduates. (Ammann, 2024)

However, participant experiences reveal significant gaps between policy intentions and implementation realities. Mario's successful RWR application illustrates the strategic navigation required:

"Even though technically, it's not related to my degree, right? So I think that's something interesting about the red white red, like technically, you have to kind of be within the same field, but it's not as strict as you would think... based on my (...) degree, I am managing international, you know, (...) is very easy to like tell the story of why this job connects." (Mario 27:41-28:08)

Hence, it can be seen that this strategic framing reveals how non-EU post-graduates especially must actively construct narratives that satisfy bureaucratic requirements, even when the connection between qualifications and employment is tenuous. This is a very crucial and

¹ Ammann, A. (2024). *Austria – Annual Report on Migration and Asylum 2023*. The Red-White-Red Card (RWR Card), which is available for a variety of categories, is the most common immigration scheme for skilled third-country nationals who wish to move to Austria. This residence permit entitles the holder to temporarily settle in the country and to take up employment with a specific employer. It may be issued for up to two years and can be renewed. RWR Cards are issued on the basis of a points system. The employment of seasonal workers from abroad takes place in Austria through so-called seasonal quotas, which are defined in a regulation of the Federal Minister of Labour and Economy (so-called Seasonal Quota Regulation).

unavoidable process, as they don't fall under the category of an "international student" from a third country anymore and their resident permit status which is of a student is at risk unless they apply for an extension for a job seeking visa, which allows a third country national to work for a maximum of 20 hours while simultaneously looking for a full time job in order to apply for a Red White Red card. As the RWR also requires one to earn a specific salary in order to continue staying and working fulltime in Austria. However, there's a more complex interplay behind these seemingly straightforward procedures and regulations. In the following statement made by Ava, it becomes apparently clear – the vicious cycle.

The apparent flexibility in field-matching requirements masks deeper structural issues, as evidenced by Ava's experience of the "vicious cycle" of work permit requirements:

"You don't have a work permit, so you don't get the job, you don't get the job, and cause you don't have a work permit. It has mostly nothing to do with your qualification." (Ava)

This circular dependency illustrates what Menjívar (2006) describes as "liminal legality," where graduates exist in prolonged states of legal uncertainty that undermine their ability to translate educational achievements into career advancement. It is also to be noted that, while going through these processes, the post-graduate students have to continue to support themselves financially. In the case of the interview participants selected for this research, who had a slight more advantage of being scholarship students, isn't always the case for most of the non-EU international students.

ICMPD Report: "Students from third countries in general do not have access to the labour market but need to apply for a work permit, including if it is for marginal employment. Students that have graduated from Austrian universities can stay in Austria and look for a job through for example applying for the RWR Card for Graduates – also described as a side-door entrance.

Employers have in the past complained that the criteria for the RWR Card are too strict and that the process is too bureaucratic and long. In 2022 and 2023 a number of reforms have been

implemented to reduce the requirements for some of the criteria. Reforms seem to have so far not led to needed efficiency gains and shorter processing times, though at the time of research it may have been too early to tell. Critics have thus argued that its actual purpose of promoting an influx of qualified workers from non-EU countries is not met (Perlaki, 2021). Several interviewees for this study also did not find the RWR Card as an effective means for attracting talent to Austria's labour market and not well suited for integration objectives. Others pointed out that the system as such is too complex and that it is hard for applicants to understand the different categories (Rechnungshof Österreich 2024). The target groups for the subcategories of the RWR Card, they argue, overlap and the various cards are not easily differentiated.” (ICMPD, 2024)

“Improving procedures for the recognition of (formal) qualifications, skills and professional experience Recognizing qualifications and skills is a major challenge due to lengthy procedures. Possible improvements include:

- Creating a database for RWR applicants' educational and professional qualifications to streamline assessment and identify required up-skilling measures.*
- Involving companies in assessing whether applicants' skills meet job requirements.*
- Considering practical professional experience in the RWR Card process, especially in sectors without formal training.*
- Shifting focus from comparing curricula to validating skills through on-site tests and portfolio methods.*
- Allowing skills recognition procedures in languages other than German.” (ICMPD, 2024)*

5.3 Credential Recognition and Institutional Filtering

Credential recognition represents a critical site where institutional filtering of non-EU graduates becomes most apparent. The Anerkennungs- und Bewertungsgesetz (AuBG, 2016) established a national legal framework for recognition and evaluation of foreign qualifications, with ENIC-NARIC Austria as the central body responsible for assessments. However, the formal recognition framework operates alongside informal processes of credential evaluation that systematically devalue South Asian educational qualifications. This could be seen in the case of Farah, this started at the very initial stage of her coming to Austria, whereby she had to get all of her educational qualification certificates nostrified in order to apply for her residence permit from Pakistan. She says,

“To attest, a document (...) Austrian embassy is not sure if it's real, so not only did I put 4 years of my work in getting a degree, but I had to go again to get it attested day and then they have a very short time for how long we see the attestation as valid because I was waiting for 3 or so months(..)validity of the attestation is 2 months. So sometimes the attestation expires while you're waiting to hear back from the embassy, and then you have to go back again to get it attested, then come back again (...)” (Farah. 14:57 – 15:46)

The formal credential recognition system, which already starts at the initial stage of the resident permit application process creates not only multiple categories of equivalence that reflect broader hierarchies within global higher education, but also act as barriers or a filtering process. These outcomes vary between nostrification (legally binding equivalence) and non-binding evaluations, creating ambiguity for graduates navigating the labour market (Statistics Austria 2024). This institutional ambiguity becomes a mechanism for maintaining flexibility in how South Asian qualifications are valued relative to European credentials.

5.3.1. Limited Institutional Support and Structural Mismatches

The structural mismatch between career services and the needs of international students becomes evident in participants' experiences of seeking employment support. Ava's experience with her university's career outreach program highlights these limitations:

"My university has this career outreach program where different companies come and different professors in different communities, and then they give a presentation, if you would like, to work with us... Career outreach programs are mostly facilitated for the European students. Not much for [international students] because the moment they shared the job description; the last line would be... you have to have a work permit or the working permission or you have to be an EU citizen."

Hence, this inadequacy of formal career services pushes international graduates toward dependence on personal and professional networks, creating what Levitt (1998) identifies as social remittances. Mario's job-seeking experience proves to be a good example to explain this dependency, as he secured a job which aligned with his expectations and qualifications through a former college alumna. (Mario 23:55)

5.3.2 Information Asymmetries and Institutional Gatekeeping

The withholding of information by university administrators creates additional barriers to accessing support. Farah's experience seeking financial assistance illustrates these dynamics:

"I asked my coordinator... is there some financial grants or a scholarship, I could apply for something in the university and she was like not that I know of... I went to the financial office and I swear to God, (...) she just opened a computer. Showed me a bunch of links, and she was like, you can apply to these. And she sent them to me and all those links were for European students. (...) No I mean, so here's the thing, and I did not know this. internships over here are paid, but in case the institution you're interning with cannot pay you the, you know. We're (the

institution) going to apply to the university for an internship grant. I didn't know about this. I found it from a student class fellow of mine. And when I asked my coordinator she said, oh, it's very little money, there's no point in applying. ” (Farah 49:01-49:57)

Subsequently, Farah discovered that her coordinator had actively misled her about internship funding:

"When I had asked, I was told [the internship grant was] just 200 [euros], and she was like, no, and it turns out that three people in my class applied for the internship grant, and they all got it... they pay you for four months, like you get paid like €400 a month. " (Farah, 50:05 – 50:41)

This deliberate withholding of information where frontline staff exercise their power in ways that can systematically disadvantage particular groups (in this case, non-EU students). The differential treatment shed light on institutional practices that create unequal access to resources based on students' national origins.

5.4 Disconnect Between Educational Qualifications and Labour Market Entry

The gap between professional aspirations and available opportunities represents perhaps the most frustrating aspect of participants' experiences. Despite their advanced qualifications, all participants encountered systematic exclusion from career opportunities that matched their educational backgrounds and professional goals.

The intersection of visa requirements with employer preferences creates what Anderson (2010) describes as the "fashioning of precarious workers." The job advertisements (that not just the interview participants, but also other non-EU international students from informal conversations shared that not all postings are transparent about their hiring requirements) routinely include requirements for EU citizenship or existing work permits, effectively excluding qualified international candidates before evaluation begins.

As Ava notes, career outreach programs at universities were "*mostly facilitated for European students*" because job descriptions consistently concluded with requirements for work permits or EU citizenship.

Anna's comparison with her German friends from similar master's degree programs reveal the disparities in opportunity access:

"I have friends who are Germans who are like right now in their third internship. They finished with me, but they're around the third and fourth internships because they get selected." (Anna, 47:06 – 47:24)

This observation doesn't necessarily mean that Anna's friends weren't qualified enough for the internships but the fact that they don't have to go through the scrutiny of being a non-EU graduate for whom the respective organization would need to go through the documentation process and register them with the AMS² in the Austrian context. This could be seen as how nationality, rather than qualifications, becomes the determining factor in accessing professional development opportunities

One of the most striking findings from the interviews is the seeming disconnect between participants' prior educational trajectories, their postgraduate degrees in Austria and the types of jobs they were able to initially secure. Despite holding advanced degrees in social sciences, and related cultural studies , three out of four participants reported that their first work experiences in Austria were in the gastronomy sector, primarily as cleaning staff, line cooks or

² **AMS (Arbeitsmarktservice):** Austria's Public Employment Service, established in 1994 as a public law service company. The AMS is the country's leading labor market organization, responsible for job placement, unemployment prevention, and supporting job seekers and employers through counseling, training, and financial assistance as part of the federal government's full employment policy. <https://www.ams.at/organisation/ueber-ams/daten-und-fakten#wien>

baristas. These positions had little or no relation to their qualifications and highlight a structural relegation of highly skilled non-EU graduates into low-status, labour-intensive sectors.

Farah explained her trajectory vividly:

"I also worked here for a year, almost a year. I was working in a café, I was a line cook. I started off cleaning, then became a line cook and I got fired, which doesn't ever happen... I also worked in another café for two months as a barista and sometimes helped a friend in catering." (Farah, 7:45 – 08:28)

5.5 Exploitative Employment and the Normalisation of Precarity

'The concept of precariousness involves instability, lack of protection, insecurity and social or economic vulnerability ... It is some combination of these factors which identifies precarious jobs, and the boundaries around the concept are inevitably to some extent arbitrary' (Rodgers and Rodgers, 1989, 5).

The normalisation of exploitative working conditions becomes evident in participants' acceptance of arrangements that violate labor standards. The normalization of such practices reflects what Menjívar (2006) describes as liminal legality, where prolonged legal uncertainty creates parallel informal economies.

However, network-based job searching often creates vulnerabilities to exploitation, as Mario eventually discovered:

" (...) They said that you have to work 40 hours, but we're gonna pay you for 20 because this is your trial period and if we like you after 3 months, we will offer you contracts so you can get the red white red." (Mario 24:38-25:14)

Another elaborate example would be Anna's experience when she initially started working at a café. She described how her European coworkers earned substantially more in tips compared to non-EU individuals, often up to five times higher, which created significant wage disparities. Despite the employer's interest in retaining them due to the difficulty of filling such positions, bureaucratic requirements like AMS documentation delayed her formal employment process (Anna, 18:35). She further explained that the AMS approval alone took about a month, which stalled her access to essential benefits (Anna, 19:15). Without a social security number, she would be excluded from health insurance and state-funded German courses, which subsequently left her uninsured for months. Even after partial communication from the insurance company, she still lacked clarity on whether she was covered or not which proved to be detrimental regarding her anxiety about workplace accidents (Anna, 19:28–20:12).

She also mentioned that she was underpaid compared to the agreed wage and acknowledged accepting exploitative conditions out of financial necessity, calling the said job as a “desperate choice” given the lack of alternatives and support from the staff administration. (Anna, 20:38; 21:40).

As she gradually acquainted herself with the hiring policies, she became aware that employers are legally obligated to register non-EU employees with AMS before they start working, pointing out inconsistencies in practice (Anna, 22:07). However, despite this regulation and communicating about it with the respective staff, she worked for weeks in an unregistered capacity, receiving cash payments, because she could not afford to refuse the opportunity after struggling for months to find employment (Anna, 22:43–23:09).

These exploitative arrangements and negotiations demonstrate how legal precarity enables employer exploitation, as post-graduates accept unfavorable conditions to secure the employment necessary for residence permit applications. The willingness to accept such conditions reflects what Alba and Nee (2003, 423 - 432) identify as segmented assimilation,

where migrants enter labour markets through disadvantaged pathways that reproduce inequality over time. (Anderson, 300 – 301)

5.6.2 Legal Exploitation

The systematic denial of formal employment contracts to non-EU students represents a form of economic discrimination that creates vulnerability to exploitation while maintaining plausible legal deniability. Farah's experience with university employment illustrates these dynamics:

"She didn't give me a contract, so she said that it's too much work to give non-EU people a contract because we have to register with the AMS... So she put her on the contract and she said, I will give her the money she will transfer to you." (Farah 01:14:43-01:15:13)

This arrangement demonstrates how bureaucratic complexity becomes weaponized to justify discriminatory practices. The claim that AMS registration is **"too much work"** for non-EU employees is contradicted by Farah's subsequent experience: *"The university cultural department did not register me with the AMS because they said it was very difficult. Whatever that means the cafe I was at. They registered me, it wasn't a problem."* (Farah 01:28:02-01:28:20)

The systematic nature of unpaid trial work represents another form of exploitation enabled by legal precarity:

"In Vienna, in Austria, if we go for a trial shift, even if it's for 4 hours, 5 hours, whatever you're supposed to get paid for it, he took all my details, but he never paid for it, it's been a year." (Farah 01:29:24)

These practices demonstrate how knowledge asymmetries about labor rights combine with legal precarity to create systematic wage theft that disproportionately affects non-EU workers.

Mario's detailed account of navigating AMS bureaucracy reveals how institutional dysfunction creates impossible situations where legal compliance becomes structurally impossible. His experience illustrates what Cabot (2012) identifies as the production of "illegality" through bureaucratic processes:

"And so there's so much dysfunction within AMS like you can talk all too different people on the same day, and they will tell you different rules." (Mario 40:13)

The criminalization of his attempts to work legally demonstrates the nature of these complex systems:

"Even though I had informed AMS at that time, even in the summer that I am going to do this is okay, am I allowed... And so they said that you are now banned officially from working... And you could appeal it." (Mario 39:09-42:22)

This creates what Mario describes as profound psychological distress:

"I think that itself is a very uneasy feeling, you know it's like I'm doing something wrong. Even though all I want to do is just work. And earn some money, and if you are EU person, this is never something you have to ever deal with." (Mario 43:17-43:52)

The temporal violence of this system becomes evident in Mario's description of living under constant surveillance:

"It's always gonna just be something hanging over your head, like a sword... It's just very nerve, wracking and very anxiety inducing... the lingering feeling is that you're constantly having to prove your worthiness." (Mario 50:58-51:31)

5.5.2 Contractual Discrimination

The systematic misdirection of non-EU graduates toward inappropriate employment opportunities reveals how institutional racism operates through the guise of "help." Mario's experience with AMS career services illustrates these dynamics:

"Asked me, what kind of jobs I'm looking for and I said, you know, maybe project management kind of things, but the things he was sending me were so not curated... I think it was coming from, like, also, this sort of complete blindness to the non eu person experience like He was just giving me these random options, and I clearly did not have a chance of getting these jobs right?"
(Mario 58:18)

The institutional inability to recognize non-EU graduates' diverse capabilities demonstrates what Robertson (2014) identifies as the systematic channeling of international students toward restricted labor market segments. Mario's observation that *"as a non EU person, we have to cast a wide net"* while being *"locked into one category of the job"* reveals the contradictory demands placed on international graduates.

5.6 Labour Market Discrimination and Racial Hierarchies

This aspect of "disconnect" becomes even more complex as the internal hierarchies of the gastronomy sector get involved further leading to other forms of racialized labour segmentation, where non-EU migrants occupy the "backstage" roles of kitchens, cleaning and heavy labour.

Anna elaborated on this point by contrasting the ethnic composition of workplaces:

"In the kitchen, there are no white people. White people are the waiters because the tips are five times more. It's me, two Koreans, and one Colombian standing in 45° heat, while the Europeans are outside." (Anna, 17:41 – 18:35)

Her observation was crucial to understand how both racialization and economic logics structure migrant employment. Non-EU international students are not only pushed towards positions detached from their qualifications but also face intra-sectoral inequalities, where even within

gastronomy, white Europeans are allocated the more lucrative and visible positions, while non-Europeans are confined to the most physically demanding and least rewarded roles.

Additionally, participants' experiences and observations pointed towards systematic racial discrimination in hiring practices that operate alongside formal credential requirements. Ava's detailed account of hiring discrimination illustrates these dynamics:

"I know two other people gave interview to the same company. Now I am Indian and the other girl was Sri Lankan and the third person is Brazilian... The Sri Lankan girl has the best ability to do that job. She was an (...)officer... the Brazilian girl has the least qualification. But they choose her over us." (Ava, 07:58 – 14:39)

Ava's observation explicitly identified the racial dynamics at play:

"The Brazilian is a white Brazilian... they will go through that process rather than going through, like selecting somebody who is qualified for it... I might sound like a proud person, but obviously don't ever think that your qualification is the issue. It's the issue with the how they perceive the nationalities. (...) And, uh, so even she knew that she's not even qualified for the job. She, like, she couldn't even pass her probation period. They had to let her go before probation. But they will go through that process rather than going through, like selecting somebody who is qualified for it. So that's quite demoralising let's say." (Ava, 07:58-14:39)

The gap between Austria's stated policy goals of attracting international talent and the lived experiences of South Asian graduates reveals fundamental contradictions within the migration regime. These contradictions reflect what Favell and Recchi (2009) identify as the European paradox of talent attraction, policies that formally welcome skilled migration while maintaining structural barriers to enter the labour market.

Despite official recognition of these problems, participants' experiences suggest little practical change in institutional practices.

5.6.1 Professional Aspirations and the Reality of Labor Market Access

The racialized dimensions of these exclusions become apparent through participants' direct experiences with discrimination. Ava encountered explicit racist comments from employers who stated there were "too many Indians" seeking employment and that "Indians are the new Chinese." (Ava) Such statements reveal how labor market barriers operate through both formal policies and informal prejudices that construct South Asian professionals as undesirable regardless of their qualifications.

The preference for European candidates over equally or more qualified international applicants emerges as a consistent pattern. Ava's comparative analysis with her European boyfriend reveals these biases clearly: despite having more relevant qualifications for a supply chain position, she was not contacted while he received interview opportunities. This systematic preference for European candidates, documented by the European Migration Network Austria (2019), represents a structural barrier that transcends individual qualifications or preparation.

International organizations, often perceived as more inclusive employers, present their own challenges. Anna's critique of UN internships as exploitative – offering minimal compensation while expecting full-time commitment – highlights how even supposedly progressive institutions perpetuate exclusionary practices. Her refusal to accept unpaid positions represents both a principled stance and a recognition that such arrangements primarily benefit those with independent financial resources.

5.6.2 Citizenship Hierarchies and Passport Privilege

The additional testimony reveals how citizenship status operates as a fundamental determinant of opportunity access, superseding qualifications and merit. Farah's experience with UN applications illustrates these dynamics:

"I actually got short listed in January 2025, but then I got rejected because it was a general service job for which they need a local person. So my passport was a problem. And they didn't

actually write this in the job description... when I got a rejection, I was like, why is that they were like we wanted a local person and I'm like, why didn't you write they're like, well you know, but you can apply for this." (Farah 01:31:21-01:32:04)

This systematic concealment of citizenship requirements demonstrates how institutional discrimination operates through procedural ambiguity that wastes applicants' time and resources while maintaining the appearance of open competition.

The comparison with refugee status holders reveals the hierarchical nature of legal categories:

"He is a Syrian. He's a refugee, so he has a different status here... If you apply on a refugee status, you can get a permanent residency card, which he had gotten. So he was considered an Austrian... he is an engineer, and he was doing a data entry job... I could never be an engineer in this country." (Farah 01:33:32-01:34:40)

6. Narratives of Navigation: Lived Experiences of Social (Im)mobility and Belonging

In the previous section and its sub-chapters, I examined the institutional barriers and filtering processes that international students from non-EU countries, particularly those in Austria must confront based on the responses and experiences gathered from the interview participants of this research. These formal structures shape access to education, employment and long-term settlement. In the following section builds on the previous chapters but by shifting the focus from structural frameworks to lived realities. Following, I aim to trace how the interview participants encountered, negotiated and sometimes even resisted these barriers while creating their own sense of = belonging within Austrian society, particularly in Vienna.

There are two main goals: Firstly, I would like to connect the participants' encounters with structural constraints to their everyday strategies of navigation; and secondly, to contextualize these strategies within broader theoretical discussions of social (im)mobility, belonging and identity. What was also extremely crucial for me while conducting this research, was to explore the role of the gender aspect in this complex interplay. Drawing on the theories outlined in the theory section, the following analysis is an attempt to show how external forces interact with individual agency to shape migrants' experiences of settlement and aspiration.

Given how this section focuses on the actual ground realities experienced by the interview participants, it was equally vital to me to ensure that I consciously create a platform within this research for presenting the voices and personal narratives of the interview participants. Their accounts revealed deeply emotional and highly individualized strategies for negotiating life in Vienna. They described moving through shifting statuses -student, part-time worker, graduate,

job seeker, while simultaneously managing the complexities of racialization and their identities as people of color. Their trajectories prove to be a fitting example to demonstrate the precariousness of being international, non-EU students who must constantly balance academic ambitions with financial survival and post-graduation uncertainty.

The participants' experiences are not linear; rather, they are characterized by a constant state of flux, where mobility and immobility intersect in unpredictable ways. This precariousness is not simply a personal struggle but a reflection of wider structural conditions that constrain opportunities for upward mobility.

From a sociological perspective, these narratives form the empirical core of this research. They foreground the agency, creativity and resilience that participants employ in navigating systemic obstacles, while also making visible the unequal structures that circumscribe their possibilities.

6.1 Lost in Translation? Social, Cultural and Educational Capital

The transformation of educational credentials across national boundaries represents one of the most complex challenges facing South Asian postgraduate students in Austria. Despite possessing advanced degrees and substantial scholarships, participants consistently encounter what Erel (2010, 643 -654) describes as the systematic devaluation of migrant cultural capital within European contexts.

Anna's experience exemplifies these translation difficulties. Despite holding prestigious international scholarships and completing multiple degrees, she finds herself working in a position unrelated to her qualifications, where her employer justified her employment by stating "*she cooks Indian food.*" (Anna, 44:44) This reduction of her extensive academic achievements to a cultural stereotype represents what Bourdieu (1986) would identify as the failure of cultural capital to convert into symbolic capital within the Austrian context. As Anna reflects:

"Of all my achievements, this was the reason why they wanted me to stay here or they are 'allowing' me to stay here in Austria. There's no alignment with my studies... It's just not who I am." (Anna, 44:59 – 45:21)

The dehumanizing nature of this experience reveals how structural barriers operate not merely through formal exclusion, but through the systematic misrecognition of migrants' qualifications and potential contributions.

6.1.2 The Systematic Questioning of Merit

The persistent questioning of merit represents a particularly damaging form of non-recognition that participants encounter across multiple contexts. Anna's experience with scholarship attribution reveals how achievements become systematically reframed through racialized and religious lenses:

"Whenever I tell people about the scholarships, they would flat out, tell me that is because I'm Indian and a Muslim, that's why about the scholarship... Completely disregarding all my achievements, I've heard that from people... Some Indians, I've heard... that she probably got the scholarship because she comes from a poor financial background and, maybe from a lower caste." (Anna, 56:28 – 57:09)

These attributions reflect what Collins (1990, 18) identifies as intersectional marginalization, where multiple identity categories combine to undermine professional credibility. However, there was a clear resistance in how Anna dealt with this, while acknowledging their psychological impact:

"My caste and my financial status, maybe financial started of course, and even if my caste my gender, my religious identity of affects these decisions is because I went through all these barriers that I went through that I challenged and I was able to come here, so if anything it's

actually more of a thing that should be pointed out in. Terms of strength rather than as advantage." (Anna, 57:38 – 58:15)

6.1.3 The Construction of “Imposter Syndrome” Through Institutional Discrimination

The imposter syndrome that emerges from these experiences reflects not individual inadequacy but what can be understood as *structural gaslighting*.³ As Berenstain explains, structural gaslighting involves conceptual and discursive practices that “obscure the non-accidental connections between structures of oppression and the patterns of harm that they produce and license” (Berenstain 2025, 23-24). Ava's account of being labeled a "diversity hire" despite her substantial qualifications and contributions illustrates this dynamic:

"So even at one point of time, I started thinking I'm just a diversity hire. Even though I do the most of the job, I'm the diversity hire because that's how it portrayed and that's how it was implemented, like 1000 times... So if you keep listening such things at one point of time, you will start doubting yourself and you will think that I might be the diversity hire... But now I'm a very vocal person and kind of an activist, so I don't care about these things, ... (Ava, 24:30-25:22)

This systematic undermining of professional competence has been documented in workplace studies. Weisshaar, Chavez, and Hutt (2024) show how organizations commodify “diversity value,” creating conditions where women and racial minorities are simultaneously celebrated

³Berenstain (2020), *White Feminist Gaslighting*, 2. Structural gaslighting describes any conceptual work that functions to obscure the non-accidental connections between structures of oppression and the patterns of harm that they produce and license. Individuals engage in structural gaslighting when they invoke epistemologies and ideologies of domination that actively disappear and obscure the actual causes, mechanisms, and effects of oppression. Structural oppressions are maintained in part through systems of justification that locate the causes of pervasive inequalities in flaws of the oppressed groups themselves while obscuring the social systems and mechanisms of power that uphold it.

as diversity assets yet stigmatized as less legitimate hires. Similarly, Omran and Yousafzai (2023,12) describe how repeated institutional invalidation leads marginalized women entrepreneurs to “internalize narratives of incompetence”, producing self-doubt that is structurally rather than individually generated.

Such dynamics reflect what Bourdieu (1977) terms *symbolic violence*, the internalization of external constraints as individual inadequacy. Symbolic violence operates when social hierarchies and discriminatory messages are misrecognized as natural, causing those subject to them to accept their subordinate positioning (Bourdieu 1977, 191). Ava’s repeated exposure to the label “diversity hire” exemplifies this: the constant questioning of her legitimacy produces what Sweet (2019) identifies as a key feature of gaslighting—the systematic manipulation of social inequalities to erode confidence in one’s perception of reality.

The repetition of discriminatory messages thus creates what Ava describes as self-doubt even among highly accomplished individuals, illustrating how structural barriers operate through psychological as well as material mechanisms. Imposter syndrome in this sense is not an individual pathology but a symptom of structural gaslighting, produced by systemic inequities and reinforced through symbolic violence.

6.1.4 Dehumanization Through Professional Reduction

The interview participants hence characterized these experiences as “dehumanizing”, which were particularly damaging to their sense of self-worth and social recognition. Anna's reduction to stereotypical assumptions despite extensive qualifications represents what she accurately identifies as dehumanization:

"...It's very frustrating in the sense, because I also know I have a lot of potential have a lot to offer have worked very hard to be where I am, and at the end of the day when people look at

your CV, they just see 5 lines and just say, no, we don't want, you know, to be reduced to that, you know, it really feels dehumanizing." (Anna 53:25 – 54:38)

Anna's reduction to "cooking Indian food" despite her extensive academic achievements represents the systematic misrecognition that participants encounter. Her observation that employers see "five lines" on her CV before dismissing her applications captures the dehumanizing nature of processes that reduce complex professional identities to simplistic categorizations. She also mentions that she didn't necessarily cook Indian food. The hiring staff assumed that she did, based on the fact that she's a woman, a person of color and Indian.

Moreover, Ava's experience also reinforces this dehumanization through professional reduction. Despite having developed most of the strategy that was being currently used in a fairly big international organization, specifically in a specialized carbon accounting and trading field, he faces systematic exclusion from positions for which she is uniquely qualified. Her name literally appears on the methodologies being used, yet companies dismiss her expertise in favor of less qualified Austrian nationals. (Ava)

This highlights a significant pattern of fundamental failure of meritocratic ideologies that operate within Austrian institutional contexts. Participants' experiences demonstrated above show that qualifications, achievements and expertise become secondary to citizenship status and racialized perceptions in determining access to opportunities.

6.2 Epistemological Violence, Knowledge Hierarchies and Symbolic Devaluation

This chapter examines how participants encounter epistemological discrimination, highlighting how non-European knowledge systems, expertise, and cultural capital are systematically devalued within Austrian academic, professional, and cultural institutions.

6.2.1 Devaluation of Non-European Knowledge in Academia

Farah's experience provide some insights into this powerplay about the systematic devaluation of non-European knowledge systems within Austrian academic institutions. Her thesis work challenged fundamental assumptions about artistic hierarchies:

" ... look, my practice was very much based in indigenous heritage and an indigenous craft... I was challenging. The status quo, that why is heritage craft considered low art, what is it between art and craft? I feel like there is none... but because of this European systemization, jo humari societies main bhi aa gaya hain, arguing because this is the right kind of art, this is the wrong kind of art." (Farah 01:55:52-01:56:16)

Her critique extends to fundamental questions about institutional flexibility:

"Why have you relegated us to a secondhand status? Because why is our identity always given a secondhand status because it doesn't fall under, you know, structures, they made... I need to find a society that has some ability to be flexible and accept change, and I don't think Austria has that ability." (Farah 01:57:16)

This assessment represents a sophisticated analysis of institutional racism that goes beyond individual prejudice to examine systemic structures that maintain knowledge hierarchies.

6.2.2 Devaluation of Global South Expertise in Professional Contexts

On the other hand, Ava's experience illustrates how Global South expertise is systematically devalued within Austrian labour market and professional contexts. She described how, despite having co-authored a climate strategy and methodology, her knowledge was challenged in an interview setting. Employers dismissed her expertise and even questioned the validity of calculations and approaches that literally bore her name. Instead of recognising her authorship,

she was asked to conduct a lengthy review task under the guise of assessment, only to later learn that the position was given to an Austrian candidate with minimal relevant qualifications.

(Ava 18:30 –18:50)

She reflected that she had already “upskilled” herself during her education and professional training in India and therefore did not need to acquire new competencies in Austria. Yet she repeatedly faced scepticism and was compelled to prove the value of her expertise:

“The proving part is very much necessary, like I have to really, really convince people that what I’m doing will help you. It’s not something wild...” (Ava, 26:36 – 26:50)

She attributed this resistance to entrenched knowledge hierarchies, whereby many older Western European professionals relied on outdated practices and were unwilling to accept insights from non-European colleagues. (ibid.)

6.2.3 Institutional Neglect and Colonial Categorisations

Farah's experience at one of the museums in Vienna, during her internship reveals how institutional practices systematically devalue and misrepresent non-European knowledge systems:

"Nobody had updated the records for the subcontinent since 1920, which means... whatever problematic labels they had from the 1920s, it was still being used to categorize textiles or costumes, as they call it clothes of our region... when they see traditional clothes from our region, they write it as costumes, because for them, it's like we're pretending to be something we're not." (Farah, 51:38 – 52:45)

This institutional neglect reflects what Erel (2010) identifies as the systematic filtering of migrant qualifications through Eurocentric frameworks that render non-European knowledge

invisible or illegitimate. The museum's use of colonial-era categorisation systems demonstrates how cultural institutions perpetuate what Said (1978) conceptualises as Orientalist frameworks that construct non-European cultures as objects of curiosity rather than sources of legitimate knowledge.

These testimonies reveal what Said (1978) and Spivak (1994) describe as epistemic violence: the delegitimisation of non-European knowledge systems. They also exemplify Erel's (2010) notion of migrant capital filtering, where credentials and expertise from the Global South are systematically discounted. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital helps situate this dynamic. Even though Ava possessed both educational and cultural capital, but institutional logics prevented its recognition and translation into symbolic capital within Austrian professional fields.

The process of credential devaluation operates not only through formal mechanisms but through what Bourdieu (1977) conceptualises as symbolic violence, the imposition of systems of meaning that legitimate existing power relations.

6.2.4 Academic Gatekeeping and Tokenism

Within academic institutions, credential recognition operates through informal processes of academic gatekeeping that privilege European knowledge systems. Farah's experience with her thesis supervision illustrates these dynamics:

"My supervisor is ... who's an anthropologist, she has nothing to do with so my thesis... I think she just has an interest in people from this global south which [she] has said to me... she's like I find different cultures, very interesting." (Farah, 42:22 - 42:39)

This tokenistic approach to supervision reveals how academic institutions manage diversity through superficial inclusion while maintaining structural exclusions. The supervisor's self-described interest in "different cultures" exemplifies what Ahmed (2000) identifies as liberal

multiculturalism that celebrates difference while avoiding substantive institutional change. This institutional logic demonstrates what Bourdieu (1986) identifies as the reproduction of cultural capital through educational institutions that define legitimate knowledge according to dominant cultural frameworks.

6.2.5 Credibility and Misrecognition

Beyond knowledge hierarchies, Ava also highlighted how credibility and authority were attributed only when embodied by whiteness or Europeanness. She recalled how both she and her Syrian female manager were overlooked, despite their qualifications, whereas a “white” manager’s voice was taken seriously:

“If the manager is white, that’s a better thing, because... if it is a coloured person and a woman, it’s probably not [going to] have that much effect.” (Ava, 28:00 – 28:18).

Ava also drew parallels between discriminatory practices in India and Austria. While many Indian employers often intrude into personal matters such as marriage and family planning, Austrian interviewers asked whether she planned to “return home” within five years:

“Here they ask, what is your plan in the next five years? Do you want to move back to your country? ... It’s the same thing. It’s a personal choice, none of your business.” (Ava, 28:20 – 28:50)

She observed that such questions were unlikely to be posed to EU nationals or white women, suggesting a persistent presumption that South Asians do not belong permanently in Austrian society.

6.2.6 Symbolic and Credential Devaluation

These narratives demonstrate how symbolic and credential devaluation work alongside epistemological hierarchies. In this context, South Asian graduates' cultural and economic capital is obstructed not only by institutional procedures but also by subtle forms of misrecognition that continually question their legitimacy and belonging.

Furthermore, the analyses of these experiences can be tied in with section four, to highlight that profound disconnection between Austria's formal commitment to attracting international talent and the lived realities of highly qualified South Asian postgraduates attempting to build meaningful careers and lives within Austrian society. Despite possessing advanced educational credentials, extensive international experience and demonstrated academic excellence, participants encounter systematic barriers that prevent the translation of their cultural capital into social recognition and professional advancement.

Considering all these accounts, it becomes apparent, how epistemological violence and symbolic devaluation function as systemic barriers, obstructing the recognition of Global South expertise and reinforcing hierarchies that marginalise South Asian graduates within Austrian academia, culture, and professional life.

6.3 Racialized Workplace Harassment and Management Complicity

A recurring and common red thread that runs through and weaves all the collective experiences of these participants together is racism. Their testimonies revealed how workplace discrimination operates through systematic patterns of racialized harassment that become

normalized within Austrian institutional contexts. Farah's detailed account of her café employment provides compelling evidence of how everyday racism manifests through micro-aggressions that escalate into systematic exclusion.

Her initial incident with her new manager is helpful to understand the intersection of racial assumptions with administrative carelessness:

"I already had a problem with her [manager], because we had an introduction and she called me some other Turkish girls name, who was also working there and she just assumed that was my name she didn't even ask... She didn't ask she would go up to everyone else and ask him their name, but with me, she just assumed that I was the Turkish girl and she called me her name." (Farah 01:03:06-01:03:27)

This systematic refusal to learn non-European names represents what Ahmed (2000) identifies as the institutional production of "strangeness," where racialized individuals become interchangeable within white imagination. It also to be noted that the public nature of this misrecognition occurring during a team meeting with merger representatives illustrates how such incidents function as what Collins (1990, 27) terms "controlling images" that reduce racialized individuals to stereotypical categories. This is further reinforced when the managerial response to Farah's complaint showed a clear systematic protection of discriminatory behavior through victim-blaming narratives:

"And then after all of this our owner, he called me... and I told him that I didn't like the way she apologized to me and he was like you're being a very difficult person, and you should just choose she's trying her best... you're already being "offhandish", and you're being very difficult right now and I don't know what to do with you, maybe you should look for other work." (Farah 01:04:45-01:05:08)

This response exemplifies what Essed (1991) identifies as the institutional reproduction of racism through the pathologization of victims who resist discriminatory treatment. The characterization of Farah as "difficult" for expecting basic professional respect demonstrates how complaints about racism become reframed as individual deficiencies rather than institutional problems.

However, the discriminatory practice at Farah's former workplace continued through the systematic firing pattern that followed reveals the racialized logic underlying workplace exclusion:

"She started firing all the women of color. So the first three people she fired was a Romanian woman who had been working at the longest... a trans woman and me." (Farah 01:05:20)

6.4 Between Movement and Stagnation: Reimagining the (Im)mobility of the Postgraduate Migrant

The experiences of participants reveal a fundamental paradox of contemporary highly skilled migration: formal spatial mobility accompanied by persistent social immobility. This contradiction challenges conventional understandings of migration as advancement, revealing instead what Ménard (2020) conceptualizes as "spatialized slowness" where temporal dimensions of migration that create particular forms of constraint despite apparent movement.

The concept of spatialized slowness manifests clearly in participants' experiences of extended waiting periods and bureaucratic delays. Ava's account of waiting "four months, five months" for job responses while companies ultimately hire less qualified local candidates demonstrates how temporal barriers operate alongside formal exclusions. Such delays create particular hardships for those without financial security, as she notes: "not everybody has the luxury of

out of job for four months." These waiting periods represent more than inconvenience; they constitute systematic mechanisms for maintaining hierarchical access to opportunities.

The cyclical nature of visa-related constraints creates another form of temporal immobility. Mario's pursuit of residency permits to achieve "market access" reflects recognition that legal status represents the fundamental barrier to professional advancement. His description of current circumstances as "slow crawl" accurately captures the experience of incremental progress within structurally constrained systems. This slowness is not individual inadequacy but systemic design, as confirmed by the Draghi Commission report's findings that excessive bureaucracy keeps international talent away from EU markets (European Migration Network Austria, 2019).

Anna reflected on how administrative delays disrupted both her academic and personal life. She noted that under normal circumstances, her master's diploma should have been issued by September or October, but the process was drawn out far longer than expected (Anna, 12:46). Instead of receiving the certificate on time, she had to wait until December, which left her residence permit renewal in limbo. Since she could not submit her extension application without the diploma, her case remained pending until January, when she was finally able to hand in the required document (12:58).

Even after this, her new residence permit was not activated promptly. She explained that it only became valid six months later than scheduled, officially starting on 10 February (Anna, 13:26). The consequences of this bureaucratic lag extended beyond paperwork: Anna recalled with regret that she missed her father's retirement celebration in India because the uncertainty around her legal status meant she could not leave Austria during that time (Anna, 13:36–13:38).

Although she recognized the impact of these delays, Anna emphasized that she did not solely fault the immigration authorities. Instead, she pointed out that her university itself contributed to the problem by taking “their sweet time” in issuing her diploma. She described how she had to repeatedly push and “bug” the university administration before finally receiving the certificate that was critical for her residence application (13:38, Anna).

6.4.1 Temporal Imprisonment and Biographical Disruption

The instrumentalization of education represents a particularly significant adaptation to temporal constraints. Anna's and Mario's pursuit of PhD studies primarily for visa purposes demonstrates how restrictive immigration policies reshape educational trajectories. Anna's explicit statement that "this PhD is just a reason for me to stay here" reveals the disconnection between formal educational advancement and genuine professional development. This instrumentalization reflects what Nohl et al. (2014) identify as the temporal stretching of transitions for highly skilled migrants, where standard career progressions become extended due to structural barriers.

It can be observed that there is a temporal mismatch between preparation and opportunity which creates additional frustrations. Anna's personal goal for "a few years of experience in practical knowledge before I got into more theoretical works" (Anna Interview) reflects standard professional development expectations that become impossible within structural, legally and time-bound constraints. Her internal conflict with her personal goals and the expectations of the university requirement for pursuing a PhD over timelines is a good example to comprehend how individual life planning for non-EU students becomes subordinated to institutional and legal requirements rather than professional logic.

This feeling of “being stuck” can be seen in the intergenerational dimensions of immobility, which emerge through participants' comparisons with peers who remained in home countries. Anna's observation that friends in India "are all thriving in their careers" while acknowledging

that "the quality of the barriers is very different" reveals how spatial mobility can paradoxically limit professional advancement. This comparison highlights the particular costs of international mobility for highly skilled individuals who might have achieved greater success within familiar institutional contexts.

"So they are really also advancing a lot, and I am very happy to see it but again somewhere in your heart, you feel incompetent that you have friends who are moving on in the life and I am still stuck in this... So that also affects the self-esteem, you know, and so I don't like to look at LinkedIn and other people's achievements, because you feel stagnant." (Anna, 01:03:38 - 01:04:00)

At this stage, it becomes crucial to reconceptualize "success" as it becomes necessary within these constraints. Mario's acknowledgment that PhD pursuits serve visa rather than purely academic purposes reflects pragmatic adaptation to structural realities. Similarly, Anna's consideration of pursuing another master's degree "which is not gonna contribute meaningfully to my career in any way" (Anna Interview) demonstrates how formal educational progression becomes separated from career development under current policy frameworks.

The persistence despite systematic obstacles reveals remarkable resilience and redefinition of mobility itself. Participants develop alternative measures of progress that accommodate structural constraints while maintaining personal agency. Anna's creation of "home here" despite professional frustrations demonstrates how belonging can develop independently of formal recognition. This emotional mobility – the development of genuine attachment and belonging – represents a form of progress that exists alongside and sometimes despite institutional barriers.

The collective dimensions of immobility also emerge through participants' observations about community dynamics. Ava's critique of the "crab mentality" within Indian professional communities – where successful individuals prevent others' advancement – reveals how

structural constraints can generate internal competition that further limits collective mobility. Her contrast with Filipino professionals who "tried to give opportunity to the other Filipinos" suggests that different community approaches to mutual support can influence individual outcomes within structurally constrained systems.

6.5 Negotiating Bureaucratic Structures: Agency, Strategy and Everyday Workarounds

This chapter explores how participants navigate Austrian bureaucratic systems, highlighting the anxieties, constraints, and creative strategies that emerge in response to surveillance, visa regimes, and structural barriers.

6.5.1 Bureaucratic Anxiety and Symbolic Violence

The experience of constant surveillance shapes graduates' daily lives and long-term planning. Mario's description of anxiety around visa applications illustrates the psychological dimension of legal precarity.

"I just have like built-in anxiety, I would say about bureaucracy general, like every time apply for a visa... Because I would like for so many for the over the last 11 years. It just comes with, I think the sort of like feeling of 'being less than' almost like you're not equally humans [to] other people, because you have to constantly prove that you're worthy of being somewhere."
(Mario)

This constant requirement to demonstrate worthiness creates what Bourdieu (1977) identifies as symbolic violence - the internalisation of hierarchies that position migrants as perpetually provisional members of society.

Despite facing systematic obstacles, participants demonstrate remarkable creativity and agency in navigating Austrian bureaucratic structures. Their strategies range from tactical

accommodations to more fundamental resistance, revealing what Scott (1985) terms "everyday forms of resistance" adapted to contemporary migration contexts.

6.5.2 Education, Visa Management, and Professional Stagnation

Anna's reflections shed light on how restrictive immigration frameworks force participants to navigate spatialized slowness by instrumentalizing education. Rather than viewing her doctoral studies as an investment in career growth, she described the PhD as "just a reason for me to stay here," highlighting how academic enrolment functions as a survival strategy within rigid visa regimes rather than a meaningful step in professional development (Anna, 48:12 – 48:48). Her contemplation of undertaking yet another master's program, even while recognizing that it "is not gonna contribute meaningfully to my career in any way," (ibid.) further highlights the disconnect between formal academic progression and genuine career advancement. For Anna, educational credentials became less about expanding expertise and more about securing the legal and spatial conditions of staying put, underscoring how immigration governance repurposes education into a tool of endurance rather than mobility.

Anna's decision to pursue additional qualifications illustrates this dynamic: *"I might go for another masters for a second master in Literature, which is another thing that I really love and I would like to do, but obviously it's not gonna contribute meaningfully to my career in any way."* (Anna)

This strategic use of education as a means of maintaining legal status while pursuing personal interests demonstrates what Scott (1985) identifies as "weapons of the weak" forms of resistance that work within rather than against dominant structures.

This instrumentalization of education produces what participants described as a condition of professional stagnation, where continual academic activity masks a lack of genuine advancement. Mario's experience captures this temporal disjuncture. He characterized this

experience as a “slow crawl,” (Mario, 1:05:20 – 01:05:53) a metaphor that conveys both the frustration of incremental progress and the heavy drag of systemic constraints. After his employment contract ended in late April, Mario went through a series of precarious, short-term jobs which included shifts at local cafés and seasonal work at a children’s camps in Vienna, as a way of sustaining himself materially while he searched for more stable opportunities. Yet, as his job applications consistently failed to yield results, he eventually reached out to his former master’s supervisor and admitted that “I think actually do want to try and go the PhD” (Mario, Speaker 2, 37:16 – 38:05).

In this way, Mario reframed further academic enrolment not as a pursuit of scholarly passion but as a pragmatic response to blocked professional channels. By collaborating with his supervisor on a proposal, he was able to secure a place in a doctoral program just before the deadline in August. This decision also necessitated a shift in legal status, as he transitioned from Austria’s Red-White-Red immigration category which is associated with labor market access to back into a student visa (Mario, Speaker 2, 38:05). This maneuver illustrates a calculated strategic navigation. He transformed educational enrollment into a form of temporal extension that allowed him to remain legally in place, even if this meant suspending the possibility of immediate career progression.

Taking both Anna and Mario’s experiences into consideration, they exemplify how participants engaged with the spatial and temporal constraints of immigration regimes by mobilize education as a strategic resource. Their narratives reveal that “progress” within such systems often takes the form of circularity or repetition, completing additional degrees that add little professional value but sustain the right to stay. This reveals a paradox at the heart of spatialized slowness: while participants appear to be advancing through continuous study, their professional lives are effectively stalled, leaving them suspended between aspiration and survival.

Strategic visa management emerges as another critical adaptation. Mario's pursuit of PhD funding serves multiple purposes: intellectual fulfillment, career development, and legal status maintenance. His recognition that doctoral studies provide "market access" through residency permits demonstrates how education becomes instrumentalized within restrictive immigration regimes. Similarly, Anna's PhD pursuit serves primarily as "a reason for me to stay here" rather than purely academic motivation.

6.5.3 Employer Biases and Limited Networks

Participants also develop sophisticated strategies for navigating employer biases. Ava's observation about interview panel composition – that "if in the panel one coloured person is present... there is a higher chance for me to getting hired rather than a all white panel" – reflects adaptive intelligence about institutional dynamics. Such insights demonstrate how individuals develop tactical knowledge to navigate discriminatory systems.

The utilization of personal relationships and networks represents another crucial strategy. However, participants note significant limitations in their network access compared to local students. Anna's struggle to find internships contrasts sharply with her German friends' multiple opportunities, highlighting how professional networks remain largely inaccessible to international students despite their qualifications.

6.5.4 Financial and Housing Strategies

Financial strategies also emerge as critical adaptations. Anna's decision to move in with her partner reflects both personal desires and economic necessity, acknowledging that "here they really loot you... in terms of rent" while noting the lack of social housing support for non-EU individuals. Such decisions demonstrate how immigration status intersects with housing policy to create additional vulnerabilities.

7. Reflections

7.1 The Paradox of Mobility and Structural Exclusion

The narratives presented in the previous chapters reveal a fundamental contradiction in Austria's approach to international education and migration. While international education is actively marketed as a pathway to opportunity and career advancement, the lived experiences of highly skilled South Asian postgraduate students told a different story. These individuals faced what could be described as simultaneous mobility and immobility. They are physically mobile, having crossed international borders to pursue education, yet they experience profound immobility in terms of career progression, social integration, and pathway to permanent belonging.

The reality for these participants was and is still marked by stalled transitions from education to employment, systematic institutional exclusion and to what as analyzed in chapter 4 particularly - temporal slowness in bureaucratic processes. Their stories demonstrated how recognition, belonging and self-worth become deeply entangled with bureaucratic and racialized structures that simultaneously invite international students to Austria while systematically marginalizing them once they arrive.

This system functions as a comprehensive filtering mechanism that maintains the appearance of openness to international talent while creating multiple barriers that prevent genuine integration and career advancement. The Austrian state and institutions face a profound contradiction in this approach. They strategically recruit international students as a form of "talent capital" while simultaneously creating systematic obstacles to their stable belonging and professional success.

7.2 Systematic Mechanisms of Exclusion

The analysis further revealed that structural barriers operate not as bureaucratic inefficiencies or administrative oversights, but as systematic mechanisms that actively filter and control access to social mobility opportunities. These mechanisms create distinct hierarchies of belonging that consistently privilege European graduates over their South Asian counterparts, despite formal commitments to non-discrimination and equal treatment.

As mentioned at the initial stage of chapter 4, even at the entry level, embassy procedures and financial requirements create temporal and economic barriers that filter applicants based on class position rather than academic merit. Requirements for blocked accounts, arbitrary appointment scheduling and repeated document attestation function as deliberate barriers designed to select what one participant describes as "a certain type of person." These procedures operate as technologies of exclusion through bureaucratic discretion rather than overt discrimination.

The employment transition reveals what participants describe as a "vicious cycle" of work permit requirements. This creates a circular dependency where employers require work permits before hiring, while work permits require job offers from employers. This fundamental structural barrier renders qualifications secondary to legal status and creates conditions where South Asian graduates must accept exploitative arrangements, work without proper legal documentation and registration or abandon career aspirations entirely.

The seemingly neutral technical aspects of immigration and integration policies, from visa regulations to credential recognition procedures, are deeply embedded with assumptions about

deservingness, cultural compatibility, and economic value. These assumptions systematically disadvantage graduates from certain regions and backgrounds while maintaining plausible deniability about discriminatory intent.

7.3 Racialized Dimensions and Institutional Discrimination

The exclusionary practices documented in this research operate through institutionalized racial hierarchies within organizational structures. Participants consistently report preferences for "white" candidates regardless of qualifications, discriminatory interview practices, and requirements for "white" managerial authority to legitimate their professional contributions. These practices demonstrate how contemporary institutional racism operates through seemingly neutral procedures that systematically disadvantage racialized minorities.

The racialized dimensions of exclusion extend beyond professional settings into everyday interactions and social belonging. Women participants, in particular, described having to embody protective, "masculinized" personas or negotiate the commodification of their intimate relationships under the pressures of visa insecurity. This points to how structural discrimination functions not merely at the level of professional exclusion but extends into deeply personal and affective domains of everyday life.

These gendered and racialized experiences highlight how structural barriers intersect with identity markers to create compound forms of disadvantage. The discrimination participants face is not simply about their qualifications or credentials but about deeply embedded assumptions about their cultural compatibility, economic value, and deservingness of belonging in Austrian society.

7.4 Adaptive Strategies and Hidden Costs

The resilience and agency demonstrated by these individuals should not be romanticized as simple examples of successful adaptation. Rather, their survival strategies reveal the heavy

costs of systematic exclusion. Participants engage in various forms of strategic adaptation including accent modification, tactical visa choices, reliance on intimate relationships for support, and redefining academic trajectories to maintain legal status.

These adaptive strategies operate within severe constraints that force difficult choices. Some participants pursue additional qualifications primarily as means of maintaining legal residence rather than for educational advancement. Others accept exploitative employment conditions or work in fields unrelated to their qualifications. Mario's focus on PhD studies reflects this strategic adaptation, viewing doctoral education as a pathway to legitimacy rather than purely intellectual pursuit.

The instrumentalization of higher education demonstrates how structural barriers reshape educational trajectories and life plans. Emotional labor, suppressed vulnerability, and performative belonging become daily survival mechanisms within contexts that continuously devalue participants' identities and contributions. The psychological and emotional costs of these adaptations are significant but often remain invisible in discussions of integration and migration policy.

8. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how South Asian postgraduate students in Austria encounter and negotiate barriers during the critical transition from graduation to employment, and how immigration policies, labor market regimes, and credential recognition processes shape their opportunities for social mobility and belonging. The findings in the reflections revealed a persistent gap between Austria's official commitment to attracting and retaining international talent and the lived realities of those who arrive with the hope of building professional and personal futures. While international students are welcomed as "talent capital," they are simultaneously subjected to structural barriers that limit their career progression, restrict their residency options and complicate their sense of belonging.

The analyses demonstrated that these barriers were not incidental, but rather systematic mechanisms that filter, delay and often exclude non-EU students from full participation in Austrian society. At the same time, institutional discrimination and racialized hierarchies further reduce opportunities for fair recognition of skills and contributions. Participants' strategies whether pursuing further education, accepting precarious employment or relying on transnational and personal networks demonstrated resilience and agency. However, these adaptations come with significant emotional, financial and psychological costs, which the individuals themselves have to bear.

Hence, the transition from student to professional life for South Asian postgraduates in Austria is shaped less by individual merit and more by structural conditions. Immigration and labor market policies, credential recognition processes and institutionalized forms of discrimination collectively determine how cultural and economic capital is valued. As a result, opportunities for social mobility and belonging remain limited and conditional.

Although, it wasn't the main aims of this research, it clearly highlights the potential scope for more coherent and inclusive policies that go beyond attracting skilled migrants to ensuring their genuine integration. It's crucial to address the contradictions between policy goals and lived experiences Austria and Europe more broadly, if it seeks to increase the potential of highly skilled migration while also fostering fairer and more cohesive societies.

Ultimately, the experiences of South Asian postgraduate students remind us that migration is not only about movement across borders, but also about negotiating recognition, dignity and belonging within new social and institutional landscapes.

9. Implications for Future Research

These limitations point to several important directions for future research. Comparative studies including participants from different world regions would help identify whether the systematic exclusion documented here affects all non-EU international students or operates differently based on specific racialized hierarchies. Larger-scale quantitative research could complement these qualitative findings by providing data on the prevalence and distribution of integration challenges across different populations.

Additionally, institutional ethnography examining how credential recognition, visa processing, and employment authorization actually function within Austrian bureaucracies could provide important insights into the systematic nature of the barriers identified through participant interviews. Such research would help distinguish between intentional discriminatory policies and unintended consequences of bureaucratic procedures.

Despite these limitations, this research provides valuable insights into how contemporary migration policies affect highly skilled migrants and contributes to understanding of how seemingly neutral institutional procedures can produce systematically exclusionary outcomes. The detailed analysis of participant experiences offers important evidence for policy discussions and theoretical development in migration studies, while pointing toward areas where additional research is needed to develop more comprehensive understanding of these complex dynamics.

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