

(Re)integration Experiences of Returning East Africans after Apprenticeship in Germany

Andres Matti Lembit Tomingas

Faculty Economics & Business Administration, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași, Romania

andres.tomingas@student.uaic.ro

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Version:

International Migration and Mobility Conference

Keywords:

Technical and Vocational Education and Training

Apprenticeship

Crafts

(Re)integration challenges

(Re)integration strategies

Germany

Rwanda

Uganda

East Africa

Migration

Skills Shortage

Development

Attracting East African youths to pursue vocational training in European Union member countries offers a dual advantage: It helps address high youth unemployment in East Africa while alleviating skilled labour shortages in Europe. Additionally, East African countries benefit from remittances and skills transfer when migrants return. However, this model can be undermined by integration and reintegration challenges.

This qualitative study explores those challenges. The research began with a review of existing literature on the integration of African vocational migrants in Germany, identifying common integration challenges, mitigation strategies and research gaps. It then focused on the perspective of ten Rwandan individuals (case 1) and ten Ugandan individuals (case 2), who migrated to Germany for apprenticeships. Eight of each group returned to Rwanda (case 3) or Uganda (case 4), after graduation. A case study approach, using semi-structured interviews, was employed to analyse their (re)integration experiences.

Participants stressed the critical need for structured preparation, both, prior to and after migration, particularly emphasizing the importance of German language acquisition – including regional dialects. The study also found that most returnees were able to reintegrate smoothly into their home country's labour market, due to the skills and values gained.

These findings might offer guidance for policymakers and stakeholders aiming to design more effective (re)integration strategies for East African education migrants. Improved support structures could enhance youth employment prospects, foster economic development in East Africa and ensure a steady supply of skilled workers for Europe.

Introduction

Germany's shift toward a climate-neutral economy demands new skills and increased workforce capacity in sectors such as construction, energy, manufacturing and transport. Regular labour and education migration

from non-European countries – particularly young East Africans coming to Germany for apprenticeship – could play a crucial role in meeting this demand. This is largely due to a lack of interest among German youths in vocational careers and the high motivation of unemployed East African youths. For the countries of origin,

benefits include remittances and potential brain gain, as migrants often leave without formal qualifications and may return as skilled professionals or engage in remote skills transfer. However, this approach will only be sustainable, if these young migrants successfully integrate into German society and choose to remain long-term.

This study employs a case study approach. First part focuses on literature review, covering relevant theories related to (re)integration of vocational education migrants, as well as the status of research in this field.

Second part of the study focuses on four cases:

- (1) Ten Rwandan youths who migrated to Germany for crafts apprenticeships.
- (2) Ten Ugandan youths who migrated to Germany for crafts apprenticeships.
- (3) Eight of the ten Rwandan individuals who later returned to their country after graduation.
- (4) Eight of the ten Ugandan individuals who later returned to their country after graduation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore their integration experiences in Germany and their reintegration experiences in Rwanda and Uganda, with a particular focus on obstacles encountered and the strategies they used to overcome them. Thematic analysis was used to identify key codes, categories and themes.

The study is guided by four research questions:

RQ1: *What integration challenges do Rwandan or Ugandan craft apprentices face in Germany?*

RQ2: *What strategies do they use to overcome these challenges and what additional strategies could be helpful in the future?*

RQ3: *What reintegration challenges do Rwandan or Ugandan craft graduates encounter upon returning to East Africa?*

RQ4: *What coping strategies are currently used, and what potential strategies could support future reintegration?*

The structure of this paper is as follows: The next section clarifies key terms to establish a common understanding. This is followed by a detailed description of the research methodology, including case selection, participant selection and the methods used for data collection, recording and analysis. The author outlines the triangulated

research design, combining literature review with qualitative interviews and addresses quality control measures and ethical considerations.

In the results section, the author presents an overview of the demographic profiles of participants as well as the identified codes and the key themes that emerged. Each case is discussed in depth by focusing on the themes, enriched with relevant quantitative data.

The discussion section interprets the findings in the context of the four cases and connects them to the theoretical framework and previous studies.

The paper concludes with a summary of the main findings, acknowledges the study's limitations, suggests avenues for future research and provides guidance for stakeholders on how the findings might be applied effectively.

Definitions

Brain Gain:

“From the perspective of a country of origin, the positive spill-over effects of the emigration of highly skilled workers such as brain circulation, or the motivational effects of migration that spur aspiring migrants to acquire further skills. Brain gain also occurs when migrants return back to their country or communities of origin and bring back with them new skills and knowledge acquired in migration.” (International Organization for Migration, 2019, p. 23)

Crafts:

The author applies the definition of German Chambers of Skilled Crafts, which consider a crafts trade as any trade operated in a craft-like manner (Handwerkskammer Niederbayern-Oberpfalz, 2024). He combines this definition with the classification scheme of the International Labour Organization, which defines 73 crafts occupations with 4-digit codes in its “Standard Classification of Occupations”, all starting with the number 7 (International Labour Organization, 2024).

Integration:

“The two-way process of mutual adaptation between migrants and the societies in which they live, whereby migrants are incorporated into the social, economic, cultural and political life of

the receiving community. It entails a set of joint responsibilities for migrants and communities, and incorporates other related notions such as social inclusion and social cohesion.” (International Organization for Migration, 2019, p. 116)

Irregular Migration:

“Movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination.” (International Organization for Migration, 2019, p. 116)

Migrant:

“An umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students.” (International Organization for Migration, 2019, p. 132)

Regular Migration:

“Migration that occurs in compliance with the laws of the country of origin, transit and destination.” (International Organization for Migration, 2019, p. 175)

Reintegration:

“A process which enables individuals to re-establish the economic, social and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity and inclusion in civic life.” (International Organization for Migration, 2019, p. 176)

Technical and Vocational Training and Education:

“Technical and vocational education and training is understood as comprising education, training and skills development relating to a wide range of occupational fields, production, services and livelihoods.” (International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, 2024)

Literature Review

The results of the literature review show that both topics, integration experiences of African youths in Germany as well as reintegration experiences on return in their home countries after graduation, were not yet researched in detail. Particularly on the reintegration in the African home countries, research is scarce and difficult to access. Thus, the author can only share literature review findings for integration experiences in Germany, not for reintegration experiences in Uganda and Rwanda.

The author conducted the literature review in three steps. He first identified the relevant theories as foundation for this study. Then, he reviewed previous research regarding the first two research questions. Finally, he identified research gaps.

Theoretical Framework

In the following, the author discusses the relevant theories and models, which shall guide this study.

Theories of Migration

This section summarizes theoretical approaches to migration, as a foundation to analyse the integration of migrants:

- *Neoclassical Economic Theories:*
Neoclassical Economic Theories frame migration as a rational, profit-maximizing decision based on economic disparities. While it suggests that migration naturally leads to equilibrium, it neglects social ties, historical influences and policies that impact integration processes (Triandafyllidou, 2023, p. 3 f.).
- *World Systems Theory:*
World Systems Theory views migration as reaction to global capitalist inequalities, where poorer nations supply labour to wealthier ones. This perspective highlights structural barriers to integration, as migrants often remain in disadvantaged positions due to systemic economic and political forces (Triandafyllidou, 2023, p. 4 f.).
- *Migration Systems and Networks Theory:*
Migration Systems and Networks Theory emphasizes the interplay of structural conditions and individual agency in migration. Unlike earlier models, it considers historical ties, economic dependencies and social

networks in shaping integration. This perspective acknowledges how existing migrant communities facilitate new migrants' social and economic inclusion (Triandafyllidou, 2023, p. 5).

- *Assimilation and Multiculturalism Theories:* Early theories emphasized assimilation, expecting migrants to adopt host cultures while native populations remained unchanged. Multiculturalism emerged as an alternative, recognizing cultural diversity and differentiated integration paths. Segmented assimilation further refined this view, showing that different groups integrate into distinct social and economic sectors (Triandafyllidou, 2023, p. 5 f.).
- *Theory of Mobilities, Flows and Globalization:* Modern migration theories move beyond linear models to highlight temporary, circular and transnational movements. The mobilities approach challenges nationalistic biases, emphasizing migration as a fluid and dynamic process. Feminist and decolonial perspectives further critique structural inequalities affecting integration (Triandafyllidou, 2023, p. 7).

Theories of Remigration

Most migration theories address remigration as a subset of broader migration processes. There are few theoretical approaches that focus specifically on remigration as a distinct phenomenon, rather than simply as the reverse of migration. Here are the theoretical approaches relevant for this research that focus specifically on remigration:

- *Preparedness Theory of Return Migration:* Cassarino (2004) offers a framework for understanding remigration, emphasizing that return is not merely the reversal of migration but a complex, resource-dependent process. His preparedness model argues that the decision and ability to return successfully are shaped by the migrant's accumulation of economic, social and human capital while abroad, as well as by their degree of agency and access to networks and institutions in the country of origin. Remigration, therefore, is contingent on how well migrants can mobilize these resources to reintegrate effectively (Cassarino, 2004).

- *Typology of Return Migration:* King (2000) provides a typology of remigration, classifying it into multiple forms that reflect the diverse motivations and experiences of returnees. His categories include the return of failure, the return of conservatism, the return of innovation and the return of retirement. This typological approach recognizes that return migration cannot be understood through a single explanatory lens, as it is often shaped by a combination of structural conditions, personal aspirations and emotional factors. His work emphasizes that return is not always final or successful. It often leads to a second migration or persistent transnational engagement (King, 2000).

Human Capital and Social Capital Theories

Here, the author introduces the human capital theory and the social capital theory, which are also models to be used in the context of integration of migrants:

- *Human Capital Theory:* The contemporary understanding of human capital views workers as assets, owning skills and knowledge with economic value. Human capital is conceptualized as the knowledge, information, ideas, skills and health of individuals, forming a basic factor of production. Human capital is also seen as an investment in education and training, with the expectation of economic and social returns. It includes attributes such as knowledge, skills, education and experience. Human capital is measured in various ways, including education level, quality, prestige, work experience and social capital (Russ, 2014, p. 113 ff.). In the context of migrant integration, education is viewed as an investment that improves migrants' skills and economic opportunities.
- *Social Capital Theory:* Social capital is seen as the goodwill available to individuals or groups, originating from the structure and content of social relations and providing access to information, influence and solidarity. It has dimensions like structural, cognitive and relational. It involves concepts like bonding and bridging and is influenced by factors such as network closure and norms that encourage cooperation. The creation of social capital begins with individuals investing in

social relationships to reap benefits. There are various approaches to measure it, e. g. assessing trust, attitudes, values and group participation (Russ, 2014, p. 113 ff.).

In summary, networks and social relationships facilitate or hinder educational migrants' integration.

Educational and Sociological Frameworks

This section summarizes other educational and sociological models:

- *Ecological Systems Theory:*
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory views human development as shaped by interactions within a layered set of environmental systems. Each level plays a role in shaping an individual's experiences, emphasizing that development occurs through the dynamic relationships between the person and its environment. When applied to education migrants, this theory illustrates how successful integration depends not just on their academic performance, but also on support within and between systems as a holistic process. For instance, their adaptation is influenced by school environments, peer relationships and, how well these interact with family life and cultural expectations. Broader factors such as immigration policies, language access and societal attitudes toward migrants further shape their educational experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
In summary, it emphasizes how individual, institutional and policy factors shape educational migrants' experiences.
- *Student Integration Model:*
Tinto's Student Integration Model emphasizes that student success and retention in higher education are closely tied to their academic and social integration within the institution. According to the model, students are more likely to persist when they feel a sense of belonging both, academically and socially. Institutional support and alignment between students' goals, values and those of the institution are important. When considering education migrants, Tinto's model sheds light on the unique integration challenges they face, e. g. cultural differences, language barriers and unfamiliar academic expectations that can hinder both academic and social integration.

Tinto's framework suggests that for education migrants to succeed, institutions must create inclusive environments that actively support their academic engagement and foster meaningful social connections, helping bridge cultural and systemic gaps that may otherwise lead to isolation or dropout (Tinto, 1993).

In summary, it highlights academic and social integration as key factors in student retention and success.

Development Theories

In the following, the author will summarize some of the most important development theories and the role of education in each:

- *Modernization Theory:*
Modernization Theory posits that economic development follows a linear path, where countries evolve from traditional to modern societies through urbanization, democracy and industrialization (Rostow, 1960). Education plays a pivotal role in this process by equipping individuals with the skills needed for modern industries and promoting a mindset conducive to technological innovation and progress. Education, in this view, acts as a catalyst for economic growth by fostering human capital, enabling individuals to participate in the economy and contribute to national development. However, critics argue that this theory often overlooks the diverse historical, social and political contexts of different societies (Smith, 2008).
- *Dependency Theory:*
Dependency Theory, developed in the 1960s and 1970s, challenges the notion that all countries will follow the same development trajectory (Frank, 1969). It argues that wealthy nations exploit poorer nations through unequal economic relationships, preventing the latter from achieving development. Education is seen as a tool for reinforcing the existing social and economic structures of dependency. While education may provide opportunities for upward mobility, it often serves the interests of the dominant powers, perpetuating inequality. Dependency theory aims for alternative educational models that focus on local knowledge, community empowerment and the development of critical thinking skills to challenge global inequities (Acosta, 2010).

Previous Research

The author conducted a rapid literature review of scientific articles, books, policy and scientific reports, using online research databases, to obtain relevant data on the integration of African TVET migrants in Germany. Of twenty identified sources, ten were assessed of appropriate quality to contribute to the findings. These included quantitative and mixed-methods research. The other ten sources were excluded, due to non-appropriate quality assessment, e. g. because of poor scientific rigor.

Because of time constraints, certain biases were tolerated. First, the only person involved in the literature selection and data extraction was the author. This might have affected transparency and reproducibility and might have increased risk of errors. Second, the author just focused on sources published since 2018 in English or German. This might have excluded significant information.

The following results show that the research questions were not yet researched in detail. The author groups the findings by integration challenges and mitigation strategies.

Integration Challenges

The low level of skills and education – being technical, but more important language – was identified in the literature review as a key factor for integration failure of African TVET migrants in Germany (Adedeji & Bullinger, 2019, p. 140 f.; Backhaus, 2020, p. 3 ff.; Becker, 2024, p. 25 ff.). Thus, migrants would have challenges to cope with the speed of education (Studthoff et al., 2024, p. 63 f.).

The German (work) culture is perceived as non-welcoming and some migrants experienced insult or physical harm (Froehlich & Schulte, 2019, p. 11 f.; Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020, p. 198).

Other major integration issues are caused by the administration processes in regards to visa, family reunification and recognition of prior qualification: Some offices are difficult to access, e. g. due to short opening times; the attitude is perceived as non-welcoming, not offering services in English; there are some unclear or overlapping mandates, so that migrants have to deal with several offices instead of one (Becker et al., 2023, pp. 1 ff., 20, 86, 116; European

Commission, 2022, p. 5 f.; 2024, p. 4; Studthoff et al., 2024, p. 63 f.).

General errands related to integration (e. g. bank account opening, apartment search or registering with health insurance) cause integration difficulties (Studthoff et al., 2024, p. 63 f.).

Limited income and career opportunities, poor medical treatment and living conditions, limited social relations, concerns in regards to safety and finances seem to cause Africans to remigrate to their home countries after finishing apprenticeship (Adedeji & Bullinger, 2019, p. 134 ff.; Backhaus, 2020, p. 3 ff.).

Another integration challenge was identified in the difficult German climate, compared to tropical and subtropical African climate (Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020, p. 200).

Mitigation Strategies

According to the literature review, the low level of skills can be overcome by contextualizing and building a partnership, in which the quality of education in Africa is improved before migration to Germany (Backhaus, 2020, p. 3 ff.; Becker, 2024, p. 25 ff.; Clemens et al., 2019, p. 1 ff.). This should include qualified language courses, conversational and technical, in the home countries before migration and in the host countries after migration (Becker, 2024, p. 25 ff.; Becker et al., 2023, pp. 1 ff., 20, 86, 116, 120 f.; Clemens et al., 2019, p. 16 ff.; Studthoff et al., 2024, p. 63 f.).

Short preparational trainings in the home countries, prior to departure, on the (work) culture and expectation management, would facilitate integration (Clemens et al., 2019, p. 16 ff.; Studthoff et al., 2024, p. 63 f.).

Administration processes should be improved, by making them leaner, faster, more welcoming, particularly looking at accelerated processes for visa, recognition of prior qualifications and family reunification (Becker, 2024, p. 25 ff.; Becker et al., 2023, pp. 1 ff., 20, 86, 116, 120 f.; European Commission, 2022, p. 6 ff.; 2024, p. 21 f.). Also, the efficient use of the existing network of integration support offers (e. g. voluntary training support or successfully integrated migrants sharing experiences) could support in the communication with authorities (Clemens et al., 2019, p. 16 ff.; Studthoff et al., 2024, p. 63 f.).

Prejudices against migrants could be resolved by face-to-face interaction between members of the host community and members of the migrant community (Froehlich & Schulte, 2019, p. 12 ff.).

Integration could be facilitated by individual onboarding and individual integration services, provided in a joint cooperation of the (training) companies, training institutions and the local governments: This would be beneficial to establish a caring mentality towards the migrant, e. g. in covering certain expenses for visa procedures or to support in general errands and administration processes (Becker, 2024, p. 25 ff.; Becker et al., 2023, pp. 1 ff., 20, 86, 116, 120 f.; Studthoff et al., 2024, p. 63 f.).

Joint activities with the host communities, e. g. religious gatherings, or support within the groups of migrants, e. g. joint dinners, can help in social integration of African TVET migrants (Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020, p. 199 ff.).

Literature Gaps

In the context of this study, the author identified three gaps in literature. He also gives recommendations for future research, which may help with integrating African TVET migrants in Germany.

First literature gap is scarcity of research on integration of regular African migrants in Germany. The author recommends conducting empirical research in this area. Most previous research focused on irregular migration, but not on skills or education migration. The integration challenges of regular African migrants and their experiences, how to overcome these, can help to build strategies to ease their integration.

Second literature gap is the lack of integrated research on the integration of education migrants from African countries, who particularly came for TVET programmes to Germany. The author recommends empirical research, focusing on the outcomes of integration, in order to judge, if this integration path can be sustainable for resolving Germany's challenge of skills shortage. There is need to survey how African youths could cope with demands and integrate in the German labour market, which necessities African apprentices and workforce have and how German training companies could create such an environment. Such research should also include soft factors of

integration, e. g. daily life aspects of African TVET migrants in Germany.

Third literature gap is country-specific research on integration of African migrants. Africa is a huge continent with more than 50 countries. Results can vary between countries. Thus, the author recommends to conduct country-specific research.

Methods

Based on the general findings from the literature review, the author chose a qualitative research approach to explore more deeply the integration experiences of African apprentices in Germany, as well as their reintegration experiences after returning to East Africa following graduation.

Case Selection

To gain more detailed insights, the study was narrowed down to specific cases. The Rwandan and Ugandan diasporas were selected due to their long-standing educational cooperation with Germany. The focus on the crafts sector was chosen because it is among the sectors most affected by skilled labour shortages in Germany.

The four analysed cases are defined as follows:

- *Case 1:* Examines the perspectives of ten Rwandan journeymen (graduates of apprenticeship programmes) in the crafts sector, with a focus on their integration experiences in Germany during their training.
- *Case 2:* Same as case 1, but ten Ugandans.
- *Case 3:* Focuses on the eight Rwandans out of the ten journeymen, who have returned home, highlighting their experiences with reintegration after successfully completing their apprenticeships.
- *Case 4:* Same as case 3, but eight Ugandans.

Approach

The author employed the case study approach as the chosen strategy of inquiry. According to Creswell (2009, p. 13), case study is recommended for exploring a specific phenomenon within a clearly defined context. In this study, first phenomena under investigation are the "integration experiences" of Rwandan or

Ugandan apprentices, while the bounded systems are defined as “Rwandan or Ugandan apprentices in the German crafts sector”. The other phenomena are the “reintegration experiences” of Rwandan or Ugandan graduates, while the bounded systems are defined as “Returning Rwandan or Ugandan graduates on the Rwandan or Ugandan labour market”. The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of this context.

The research focused on addressing the following research questions (RQ):

***RQ1:** What integration challenges do Rwandan or Ugandan craft apprentices face in Germany?*

***RQ2:** What strategies do they use to overcome these challenges and what additional strategies could be helpful in the future?*

***RQ3:** What reintegration challenges do Rwandan or Ugandan craft graduates encounter upon returning to East Africa?*

***RQ4:** What coping strategies are currently used, and what potential strategies could support future reintegration?*

The case study methodology was chosen because it allows for detailed exploration of the lived, contextualized experiences of participants. The author examined how various factors – including preparation, education, financial status, societal and cultural contexts, administrative systems, work and school environments, as well as family and social networks – affect both integration in Germany and reintegration in East Africa.

Selection of Participants

A combination of purposive and opportunistic sampling was used to select twenty participants.

For case 1, the selection focused on ten Rwandan citizens who met the following criteria:

- Migrated to Germany immediately after completing high school in Rwanda, without pursuing any additional formal education beforehand (there is one exception of one who migrated with bachelor’s degree), and
- Successfully completed an apprenticeship in Germany at least two years prior, enabling them to retrospectively reflect on their integration challenges and the strategies they used to overcome them.

For case 2, the first requirement slightly differs:

- The ten Ugandan citizens often migrated at a much later stage in life and most of them already finished a TVET training in Uganda.

Cases 3 and 4 were drawn from the same groups of participants as cases 1 and 2, with an additional criterion, which was fulfilled for eight of the ten Rwandans and for eight of the ten Ugandans:

- Returned to their home country at least two years ago, allowing for a retrospective assessment of their reintegration challenges and corresponding coping strategies.

The author leveraged professional opportunities within his network, built through over a decade of experience working in technical training and development cooperation in East Africa.

Data Collection

The author served as the interviewer, conducting a total of thirty-six semi-structured interviews either in person or online when in-person meetings were not feasible:

- Twenty focused on integration experiences and
- Sixteen focused on reintegration experiences.

To foster a relaxed environment, most interviews were held in a restaurant setting. Each session was divided into two parts: A fully structured section aimed at gathering general and quantitative data, and a semi-structured qualitative section designed to explore individual experiences in depth. The interview question catalogue is available online (Tomingas, 2025).

Data Recording and Transcription

The author utilized an interview and observation protocol via Google Forms during the interviews. This application served a dual purpose: To display interview instructions and questions, and to document responses and observational notes. In addition to written notes, audio recordings were made of each session. Within one week of each interview, the recorded audio was transcribed and consolidated with the typed responses and observations.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti (version 25), following a thematic analysis approach. The author began by familiarizing himself with the data, taking notes and memos on

tone, credibility and emerging ideas. Open coding followed, with key data features identified and assigned concise codes (no longer than five words).

Subsequently, broader patterns or themes were derived from the initial codes. These themes were refined to eliminate redundancies and ensure they were both representative and clearly named (also limited to five words). The resulting codes were organized into matrix models, structured by research questions and overarching themes.

Findings were then synthesized into case descriptions, incorporating identified themes and quantitative data. Finally, the author interpreted these findings in relation to the research objectives, existing theories and prior studies.

Reliability, Validity and Generalizability

To ensure qualitative reliability, the author reviewed and corrected all recorded information and documented each step and procedure in memos. This is applied to minimize the risk of meaning shifts in coding (Creswell, 2009, p. 190 f.).

Several measures supported qualitative validity, following Creswell (2009, p. 190):

- All relevant information, including negative and conflicting data, was reported.
- Detailed descriptions were provided to enhance the realism and depth of findings.
- The author disclosed his potential bias as an experienced development practitioner working in East African education, specifically supporting local employment measures to reduce migration to Europe. This contrasts with the study's focus on migration to Germany for technical training.

Although the study involved a small sample size (ten participants for case 1, ten for case 2, eight for case 3 and eight for case 4), the objective was not to achieve statistical generalization. Instead, the research aimed to verify, specify or challenge the findings of the literature review and contribute new insights to the defined cases.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were guided by the European Charter for Researchers (European Commission, 2005). At the start of each interview, the author

explained the research purpose and its societal relevance. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, with both parties receiving a signed copy. Participants were informed of their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time or seek further information.

To protect privacy, all physical consent forms, notes and audio recordings were destroyed within one week of the interview. Digital data – such as transcriptions and scanned consent forms – are securely stored in anonymized and password-protected format.

Participation was voluntary, with measures in place to ensure a non-discriminatory and comfortable interview environment. Food and water were provided to support participant well-being throughout the sessions.

Results

The author begins by presenting the demographic details of the research participants for the four cases. He then outlines the codes and the themes that emerged from them, starting with cases 1 and 2 (consolidated), followed by cases 3 and 4 (consolidated). Each theme is discussed in detail, with supporting evidence drawn from the data.

Participants' Demographics

Ten participants held Rwandan and ten Ugandan citizenship. The demographics were consolidated for both countries, where similar. Differences between the countries will be indicated.

Eighteen participants were male and two female. In terms of religion, eighteen identified as Christian and two as Muslim. Each participant had migrated to Germany within the past 25 years: thirteen in 2002, three in 2005, two in 2014 and two in 2019. Their shared migration motivation was desire for “exposure to something new” and “learning something new”. Sixteen participants have since returned to East Africa, while four remain in Germany, working as part of the skilled workforce. Accordingly, cases 1 and 2 include all participants, while cases 3 and 4 specifically examine the experiences of the sixteen (eight Rwandans, eight Ugandans), who returned.

At the time of migration, eleven participants had recently completed secondary school, seven

graduated in TVET and two held a bachelor's degree. The difference between the two countries was, that Rwandans mainly migrated as secondary school leavers, while Ugandans mainly migrated as TVET degree holders.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Basic Demographics (current)	<p>Gender: 18 male / 2 female</p> <p>Religion: 18 Christian / 2 Moslem</p> <p>Mean age: Rwanda: 41 years (29 – 70 years) Uganda: 51 years (36 – 61 years)</p> <p>Family situation: 18 married with children 2 singles</p>
Migration Background	<p>Migration history: 11 in 2002 to Germany (returned home in 2006) 3 in 2005 to Germany (returned home in 2010) 2 in 2014 to Germany (returned home in 2018) 2 in 2002 to Germany (still work in Germany) 2 in 2019 to Germany (still work in Germany)</p> <p>Family: 17 migrated without family / friends 1 migrated with a sibling 2 already had extended family in Germany</p>
Education	<p>Education before migration: Rwanda: 9 secondary school / 1 bachelor's degree Uganda: 2 secondary school / 7 TVET graduates / 1 bachelor's degree</p> <p>Education in Germany: 4 domestic electricians 4 car mechanic 3 masons 3 metal fabricators 2 carpenters 2 caretakers 1 cook 1 food technology</p> <p>Education after migration: 10 TVET graduates 6 bachelor's degree holder 4 master's degree holder</p> <p>German language skills before migration: 11 without German language skills 9 with basic German language skills</p> <p>German language skills now: 2 with basic German language skills 15 with advanced German language skills 3 with native German language skills</p>
Employment	<p>Mean salary: Rwanda before migration = 203 USD (0 – 1,000 USD) Rwanda now = 1,350 USD (500 – 2,000 USD) Uganda before migration = 70 USD (0 – 500 USD) Uganda now = 1,405 USD (50 – 2,000 USD)</p> <p>Employment now: 12 in formal employment according to studies 3 in formal employment in different sector 2 in informal employment according to studies 3 students</p>

Nine participants had no income. The remaining eleven had minimal earnings. There was a big difference in income before migration between the countries: In Rwanda it was 203 USD and in Uganda 70 USD. In terms of language, eleven had

no knowledge of German and nine had only basic skills. Most (seventeen) migrated without any accompanying family or friends; one migrated with a sibling, and two had extended family already living in Germany.

Among the twenty interviewees who underwent vocational training in Germany, four earned journeyman certificates as domestic electrician, four as car mechanic, three as mason, three as metal fabricator, two as carpenter, two as caretaker, one as cook and one as food technologist. All participants successfully completed the full training duration – one year focused on acquiring language proficiency, followed by three years of practical and theoretical training in the respective trade.

At the time of the interviews, participants ranged in age from 29 to 70, with a mean age of 46. The Rwandan mean age was 41, while the Ugandan mean age was 51. Eighteen were married with children, while two were single. Most had attained either advanced or native-level proficiency in German. Ten participants pursued higher education following their vocational training and had since earned bachelor's or master's degrees.

At the time of the study, fourteen participants were employed in the profession for which they had been trained. Three worked in different sectors and three were students. Their average income had risen to around 1,350 – 1,400 USD. This is seven times higher than before migration for Rwanda, but even twenty times higher for Uganda. It was also much higher than Uganda's and Rwanda's gross domestic product per capita and month, which was less than 100 USD in 2023 for both countries (World Bank, 2023).

Eighteen participants worked in formal employment, which is not common in Rwanda or Uganda. All interviews have been conducted between January and March 2025.

Overview

In this section, the author provides an overview of the codes and themes per case. Since the findings of case 1 and 2 as well as 3 and 4 were similar, these cases will be described together.

Cases 1 and 2

The author identified 146 codes in open coding as part of the thematic analysis process for cases 1 and 2 (consolidated). Within repetitive revision cycles, he consolidated 14 key themes, emerging from the codes. For easier comprehension, the author grouped the codes in a matrix model by research question (RQ) and by the identified overall themes.

Table 2: Themes & Research Questions: Cases 1 & 2

Theme \ RQ	RQ1	RQ2
Theme 1: Personal Support (237)	-Missing family (13)	-Family in Germany (4) -Financial support received (10) -German friends for language integration (26) -German friends for learning culture (24) -German spouse for language integration (19) -German spouse for social integration (16) -Guidance of boss / trainer (18) -Personal support (51) -Strong network (30) -Support of colleagues (25)
Theme 2: Language Skills (219)	-Company training too fast (7) -Daily life challenged by language (14) -Failed tests due to language (26) -Lack of conversational language skills (42) -Lack of technical language skills (42) -Learning challenging due to language (36)	-Conversational language course (18) -Language course before migration (6) -Learning language independently (2) -Technical language course (15) -TODO Additional evening language courses (11)
Theme 3: Organized Preparation (159)	-Challenges with errands (7) -Lack of expectation management (4) -Lack of infrastructure/logistic understanding (5) -Lack of organizational / process understanding (4)	-Expectation management by employer (4) -Expectation management preparation (18) -Formal preparation (home/arrival) through NGO (11) -Formal preparation in Germany (4) -Good preparation (16) -Informal preparation (28) -Information by German Embassy before (3) -Selection of best as preparation (2) -Soft skills preparation (18) -Training (work) culture (6) -Training behaviour dressing before migration (1) -TODO Explain German TVET (practice) well (3) -TODO Formal preparation in Germany (6) -TODO Formal preparation in home country (10) -TODO Training infrastructure / logistic by employer (3) -TODO Training organizational / process by employer (4) -TODO Training visa / admin procedures still home (2)
Theme 4: No Challenges (141)	-Good multi-cultural reception (1) -Apprenticeship allowance is enough (17) -No savings before migration (17) -No invest in Germany (10) -Administration similar to home (4) -Apprenticeship was easy (7) -Entry requirements easy (13) -Equal chances / pay as Germans (3) -Formal procedures were easy (7) -German TVET accommodative (structured, well organized, SPOs, practice, books) (13)	
		-Labour office informs well (1) -Language no problem (2) -Nothing lacked (healthcare, housing, food) (17) -Overall good integration experience (5) -Visa process was ok (5) -Technical skills matter only (5) -Technical theory home is good (14)
Theme 5: Strong Personality (117)		-Additional technical classes (7) -Additional work (12) -Being culturally flexible & empathic (8) -Being motivated (31) -Endurance (18) -Value change (punctuality, correctness, speed) (10) -Working hard (31)
Theme 6: Regional Preparation (105)	-Lack of behaviour / dressing knowledge (2) -Lack of dialect language skills (45) -No patience with migrant (6)	-Organized by volunteers (4) -Learning dialect (18) -Patience with migrant (2) -Preparation of local community (11) -TODO Preparation by geographic region (15) -TODO Training behaviour / dressing by employer (2)
Theme 7: Group Activities (85)		-Integration through going out (7) -Integration through school (11) -Integration through sports club (14) -Counselling by city-event-spot (3) -Counselling through church (11) -Counselling through self-aid groups (6) -Events by city-event-spot (3) -Integration through church (11) -Learning language through church (10) -Learning language through self-aid groups (7) -Joint study groups (2)
Theme 8: Hindering Home (78)		-Bad weather/climate (13) -Being alone (6) -Financial responsibility for family home (17) -Home sick (12) -Missing food (8) -Missing weather (9) -Missing welcoming African social culture (9) -Seeing opportunities at home (4)
Theme 9: Exposure Irreplaceable (76)	-Cultural shock (19) -Preparation no substitute for exposure (20) -Value difference (punctuality, correctness, speed) (12)	-Avoid diaspora to learn language (14) -Preparational exposure (11)
Theme 10: Bad Reception (62)		-Bad reception / non-welcoming culture (29) -Bullied by colleagues (6) -Jealous colleagues (1) -Discrimination (23) -Stronger punishment of racism (3)
Theme 11: Quick Reaction (33)		-Small companies think small (2) -Adjusting training speed (7) -Avoid small companies (3) -Changing companies (5) -Discussing challenges immediately with colleagues/boss (9) -Learning from challenges of migrants (7)
Theme 12: Stop Bureaucracy (27)	-Challenging visa/admin processes (5) -Family reunification difficult (2) -Prior certificate accreditation challenges (2) -Recognition of prior certificates failed (3) -Uncertainty of visa approval (2)	-TODO Easier recognition of prior qualification (6) -TODO Easier visa procedures (3) -TODO Integration office for logistics, errands, administration (2) -TODO Make family reunification easier (2)
Theme 13: Technical Skills (25)	-Education Germany requires practice (4) -Education home lacks practice (7) -Lack of technical skills (3)	-TODO Learn technical practicals before migration (9) -TODO Provide equipment to African schools (2)
Theme 14: Financial Security (7)		-Additional finances through volunteering (6) -TODO Financial support for labour migrants (1)

The table above displays this matrix, indicating the mentions of each code as well as the consolidated mentions for the overall themes.

Cases 3 and 4

The author identified 80 codes in open coding as part of the thematic analysis process for cases 3 and 4 (consolidated). Within repetitive revision cycles, he consolidated 6 key themes, emerging from the codes. For easier comprehension, the author grouped the codes in a matrix model by research question (RQ) and by overall themes.

Theme 5: Content with Return (45)	-Home is boring (2) -Missing German food (1) -Missing German friends (7) -Missing German organization (e. g. traffic) (5) -Missing German weather (1) -Missing technical / intellectual discussions (4)	-At peace with remigration history (7) -Better life home (3) -Investment home is easier (2) -Less stress home (5) -No investments in Germany (5) -Not interested in return to Germany (3)
Theme 6: Financial Stability After Return (40)	Less money home (5)	-Financial Stability after return (4) -Benefit from skills gap (17) -Investment home is easier (2) -Returned home with savings (9) -Richer than in Germany (3)

Table 3: Themes & Research Questions: Cases 3 & 4

Theme \ RQ	RQ3	RQ4
Theme 1: Better Labour Market Reintegration (179)	-Challenges finding a job (5) -Cultural shock (hierarchy) (2) -Employers differentiate foreigners / locals (3) -Labour market reintegration challenging (5) -Loss of job during absence (5) -Mismatch learnt / needed skills home (3) -No recognition of foreign certificate (16) -No salary increase after return (7) -Private sector not better (2) -Reintegration with colleagues challenging (3) -Technical language barrier (1)	-German embassy facilitates (1) -Labour market reintegration with foreigners (5) -Returnees form associations (2) -Skills transfer (16) -Support by German government (2) -Instant employment after return (17) -Never unemployed after return (5) -Better work conditions after return (14) -Companies facilitate (4) -Jobs after return better (14) -Labour reintegration easier than integration (5) -Learnt skills precious / scarce at home (23) -More responsibility after return (19)
Theme 2: German Experience Applied (110)	-Value change (correctness, punctuality, structure) (27)	-Applying what learnt abroad (22) -Restructured own business after return (6) -Started own business after return (10) -Economic advantage by learnt abroad (18) -Economic advantage by new values (27)
Theme 3: Social Reintegration Challenging (107)	-Friends / family exploit a. return (14) -Friends discriminate after return (9) -Friends have cliches a. return (13) -Locals dislike new values (15) -Locals jealous (18) -Social reintegration challenging (9)	-Buy peace with friends (9) -Restructured friends after return (11) -Social reintegration with foreigners (9)
Theme Public Reintegration Measures (82)	-Business guidance for returnees lacking (7) -Government differentiates foreigners / locals (4) -Government differentiates TVET / university (3) -Technical advice for returnees lacking (5)	-Better private than public (3) -Free land for returnees (1) -Local government knows diaspora (4) -Local government supports reintegration (5) -Public authorities tolerate foreign certificate (7) -Public returnee job search platform (1) -Public start-up courses for returnees (1) -Public start-up money f. returnees (1) -Tax free reimport (e. g. car) (1) -TODO Business guidance for returnees (8) -TODO Mapping returnee / job (4) -TODO Overcome prejudices for management (2) -TODO Personal (re)migration advice (realistic) (5) -TODO Personal expectation management (endurance) (4) -TODO Recognition of foreign certificates (10) -TODO Technical advice for returnees (6)

The table above displays this matrix, indicating the mentions of each code as well as the consolidated mentions for the overall themes.

Themes of Cases 1 and 2

This section deals with the different themes identified for cases 1 and 2, starting with the most emerging (most mentions consolidated for twenty research participants from Uganda and Rwanda).

Theme 1 – Personal Support

Personal support emerged as the most frequently mentioned and thus most significant factor contributing to successful integration in Germany. It is therefore considered the primary integration strategy.

Seventeen participants migrated to Germany without accompanying family members, making the absence of personal support – particularly from friends and family – a major challenge in their integration journey. All participants expressed a strong sense of missing their familial and social life in their home country. In contrast, three interviewees, who already had extended family in Germany, described this as a substantial source of support during their integration.

According to all twenty participants, relationships with German friends and spouses played a vital role in social integration, especially in learning the German language. These personal connections also facilitated cultural understanding and provided insights into the German legal system.

In cases where family and friends were not present in Germany, other personal supporters stepped in to fill the gap. Integration was most successful when such support was available from the outset. All participants learned about the opportunity to migrate to Germany and pursue vocational training through personal contacts. These individuals offered informal guidance

during the preparation phase – advising on what to expect (e. g. potential racism, bad weather, social attitudes or challenging work culture) and how to adapt (e. g. punctuality and compliance with legal norms).

These same personal contacts often introduced the participants to their future apprenticeship employers. In some instances, they even financed the participants' travel expenses and arranged housing for the first year in Germany. During this initial year, the migrants focused solely on language acquisition and did not yet receive an apprenticeship allowance. An apprenticeship allowance was paid from the second year onwards, making them financially independent.

The extended networks of these initial supporters also assisted with various administrative challenges, such as delays in visa processing or issues with the recognition of prior qualifications. All participants emphasized that stakeholders involved in the vocational training – such as employers and training personnel – were aligned with the supporters' goal of empowering African youths through education in Germany and thus actively contributed to the success of the Ugandan and Rwandan apprentices.

Support from employers and company trainers extended beyond professional training. They also helped the apprentices to understand everyday tasks, such as grocery shopping. They offered guidance on social norms, including appropriate attire. In one case, even a local mayor intervened to streamline administrative procedures.

Theme 2 – Language Skills

All twenty participants had little to no knowledge of German before migrating. This language barrier significantly hindered their integration during the first year – at the workplace and in vocational schools – due to limited communication with supervisors, colleagues and clients. As a result, they struggled to keep up with training and even failed some initial exams. One key challenge was the focus on conversational German in language courses, while they required technical terminology for their training. They also faced difficulties in everyday communication.

Language competence was identified as the second most important factor for successful integration. To overcome language challenges,

the migrants pursued evening classes in technical German and emphasized the importance of practicing through everyday conversations, especially with native German speakers. They deliberately avoided isolating themselves within the Rwandan / Ugandan community and sought to engage more with Germans. Some even began learning the language before migrating. They recommended easier access to German courses, especially evening classes, as part of a formal preparation strategy.

Theme 3 – Organized Preparation

The interviewed migrants noted that their integration experience was smoother compared to other TVET migrants, primarily due to the personal support they received. However, they criticized the lack of structured support, which forced them to remain flexible, exert considerable effort and frequently improvise to adapt. They faced challenges with daily tasks – such as shopping (due to unfamiliar currency and products), understanding workplace and societal expectations (e. g. punctuality and dress codes) and navigating the traffic system.

To enhance integration outcomes, all interviewees recommended structured pre-departure and post-arrival orientation programmes. This was the third most frequently cited factor for successful integration. While their actual preparation was mostly informal, they strongly endorsed formal, organized training as a future strategy. These courses should be split into two phases: One before departure in Rwanda / Uganda and another upon arrival in Germany.

Eleven interviewees suggested that the pre-departure phase in Africa could be delivered by an agency, funded by prospective employers. This training should include language skills (both conversational and technical), vocational theory and practice, administrative processes (e. g. visas and recognition of prior certificates), everyday life skills and region-specific information.

For the post-arrival phase in Germany, four participants recommended that employers play a leading role. They should clearly communicate expectations to new trainees while also introducing them to the local infrastructure, workplace organization and climate. This phase should also cover cultural norms, such as appropriate behaviour and dress code.

Theme 4 – No Challenges

Thirteen participants reported smooth recognition process of their high school certificates, which was necessary for registering in the programmes. They described the administrative procedures, including visa applications, as manageable and comparable to systems in Rwanda / Uganda. Two participants praised the labour office for providing clear information in advance.

The participants viewed the German TVET system as accommodating, well-organized and rich in learning materials and hands-on training. The interviewees found their apprenticeships accessible and equitable – receiving equal pay and job opportunities compared to German peers. Despite starting without savings, they all successfully graduated and did not experience a lack of basic needs, e. g. healthcare or housing.

Theme 5 – Strong Personality

Another frequently cited integration factor was personal resilience and strength. Migrants saw the move to Germany as a chance for personal growth and acquiring new skills. They were mentored by contacts who stressed that success in Germany required commitment, punctuality and discipline.

Migrants had to quickly adapt, develop soft skills, and commit to continuous learning – often beyond regular work hours. Success required attending technical and language classes in the evenings, volunteering and engaging in social hobbies that supported integration. Overall, the process demanded flexibility, empathy, motivation and endurance.

Theme 6 – Regional Preparation

Regional differences in Germany presented an additional challenge. Migrants found that societal norms, employer expectations and even language varied by region. A lack of region-specific behavioural guidance – such as local dress codes or greeting customs – hindered their adjustment.

Interviewees felt that locals and employers were not always patient with newcomers. They also struggled with local dialects, which were often unintelligible compared to standard German. They recommended including local dialects and customs in integration programmes, potentially led by employers.

Theme 7 – Group Activities

Most interviewees engaged in sports such as basketball and football to meet people and practice German. These friendships extended into other social settings and even job opportunities – one was hired at a garage by a sports friend.

They also participated in peer support groups to share experiences and help each other navigate daily challenges. Some organized mixed study groups with German and international apprentices, which fostered both language skills and social integration.

Religious gatherings provided another platform for integration, though some noted it was hard to find age-appropriate religious communities. African diaspora events offered additional emotional and practical support.

Theme 8 – Hindering Home

Migrants described life in Rwanda / Uganda as joyful and socially rich, in contrast to the demanding life in Germany. They missed the social warmth and favourable climate back home, which led to homesickness and feelings of isolation.

Although they gained valuable technical knowledge in Germany – often not yet attainable home – this prompted many to start businesses back home, leading them to disengage from entrepreneurial opportunities in Germany. None invested locally in Germany.

Initially free of financial obligations, their improved economic situation led to growing responsibilities toward family back home. These ongoing obligations – such as monthly remittances and funding medical care or household improvements – added stress and distracted from full integration. In some cases, this eventually led to their return home.

Theme 9 – Exposure Irreplaceable

Despite any preparation, migrants still experienced cultural shock upon arrival. They were surprised by the cold weather, advanced infrastructure and daily realities like navigating highways and public transport. Critical soft skills – like reliability and punctuality – were only fully learned through lived experience in Germany.

To ease their transition, some avoided isolating themselves within the diaspora and made preparatory visits to Germany before starting their apprenticeships. These visits proved helpful in reducing the cultural shock later.

Theme 10 – Bad Reception

All participants noted that German social and workplace cultures often felt unwelcoming. They were surprised by how neighbours ignored each other and initially took it personally, until realizing it was cultural.

Every interviewee experienced racism – ranging from police profiling and public insults to workplace bullying. One participant believed his colleagues were jealous of his success. The suggested solution was stricter enforcement of anti-racism laws, as current measures were seen as insufficient.

Theme 11 – Quick Reaction

One participant recounted how he faced jealousy from colleagues at a small company, but had a more positive experience after transferring to a larger firm. He advised others to consider company size when choosing employers.

Most participants agreed that quick action was key. When facing issues, they should immediately speak to supervisors and, if necessary, switch companies. They also encouraged seeking advice from other migrants.

Theme 12 – Stop Bureaucracy

Though most had smooth experiences with document recognition, two participants encountered serious issues. All found German bureaucracy demanding and needed guidance through it. The complexity of family reunification processes discouraged any efforts.

Participants recommended simplifying administrative processes – especially visa applications, qualification recognition and family reunification. They also called for centralized, one-stop service centres to handle all migration-related issues.

Theme 13 – Technical Skills

Participants appreciated the strong practical focus of the German TVET system, which complemented the more theory-oriented

foundation they had acquired in Rwanda / Uganda. However, workplace integration became difficult, especially in the first year, since the migrants were not yet used to the hands-on system.

To bridge the gap, participants attended technical evening classes, often run by volunteers. They recommended that future TVET migrants receive practical training home before migrating.

Theme 14 – Financial Security

Despite arriving with no savings, all migrants managed to build financial security during their apprenticeships. Some took second jobs or volunteered for small stipends in their free time. Their workplace integration – bolstered by discipline and reliability – was crucial in securing consistent income and social benefits.

Comparison – Cases 1 and 2

The integration experiences in Germany were similar for the two cases. There have been minor differences. Rwandans mentioned that the administration in Germany was like home, though this was not mentioned by Ugandans. Rwandans also had more challenges with regional dialects than Ugandans. However, German language was a bigger integration challenge for Ugandans than for Rwandans. Personal support was not so important for Ugandans, same as quick reaction. Ugandans often mentioned that they had no challenges to integrate.

Themes of Cases 3 and 4

In this section, the author gives detailed information on the different themes identified for cases 3 and 4, starting with the most emerging (most mentions consolidated for sixteen research participants from Uganda and Rwanda).

Theme 1 – Better Labour Market Reintegration

Four returnees mentioned that reintegration at the workplace in Rwanda and Uganda was easier than integrating in Germany. However, several returnees, particularly from Uganda, had challenges with the labour market reintegration. They lost their jobs during their absence. Some returnees found it easier to align with international staff, as their work styles had shifted during their time abroad. Occasional

misunderstandings arose when different expectations regarding punctuality and structure emerged.

Two returnees mentioned experiencing a cultural shock on return, noticing the strong hierarchy at the East African employer. Several interviewees emphasised that employers treat foreign and local employees differently. Three participants mentioned that there is a mismatch between the level of skills they learnt in Germany and the level which is needed in Rwanda and Uganda. Seven returnees expected a higher salary due to the in Germany acquired skills than their actual salary.

Most returnees reported difficulties in navigating the recognition of foreign certificates, which they attributed partly to limited information about national accreditation procedures. Many employers appreciate the German certificate. However, if a returnee wants to apply for public positions or university studies, an equivalent Rwandan or Ugandan certificate was needed.

All returnees from Rwanda instantly found a job on return and were never unemployed since. Five of the eight returnees from Uganda lost their job during their absence and had challenges to find employment on return.

Most participants confirmed that their skills were scarce and that their current jobs and working conditions were better than pre-migration. According to their self-assessment, now they took more responsibility at the workplace and for the society than pre-migration. Their entrepreneurial activities led to employment of other people. They regularly provided technical skills transfer in their professions. Some availed themselves for preparation workshops of the German embassy for future migrants. Few returnees advised the German and the local governments in technical and country-specific matters. This was non-profit. Two Ugandan participants founded business membership organizations after return.

Theme 2 – German Experience Applied

All returnees emphasised that it is not only the technical skills learnt abroad, but also the soft skills as part of their changed value system and, to a certain extent, the German language skills, which they apply back home. These characteristics of their new value system – the returnees particularly mentioned punctuality,

structured working procedures and correctness – and the skills learnt would lead to an economic advantage for them on return home. One returnee shared the German language skills would help him to get additional jobs.

Most returnees also act as entrepreneurs and consultants, besides their formal employment. Some do consultancies or advise the German and the local governments in technical and country-specific matters. Others own different businesses, e. g. in transportation, import, training or real estate. All returnees mentioned that Germany equipped them with the entrepreneurial skills to start, run or reorganize these businesses.

Theme 3 – Social Reintegration Challenging

All returnees mentioned that in the home country's society some locals without migration background changed their behaviour towards them, compared to pre-migration. They would have prejudices towards them and think in clichés, e. g., that diaspora returnees have a lot of money, or, that they developed bad values. Some returnees even felt discriminated. Social reintegration was easier for Ugandan returnees.

Some returnees felt that their changed financial situation led to new expectations from friends and family, which created emotional and social tension. To be at peace, most returnees decided to be generous with their friends and family. But eight also decided to reorganize their network of friends, focusing now on international friends.

Theme 4 – Public Reintegration Measures

All Ugandan participants commented on lack of reintegration support measures on behalf of their government. On the contrary, the Rwandan interviewees emphasised that their government already offers a big set of reintegration measures. The government would allow the returnees to import their belongings untaxed, when coming back (e. g. car). The Rwandan government would also know the diaspora well and connect them through a platform to potential jobs. In addition, there would be programmes for entrepreneurial activities, e. g. start-up money, start-up courses and (partially) free land for economic activities.

But they also recommended the Rwandan government to focus on additional reintegration measures in future, e. g. technical advice for

returnees, including a mapping between returnee and vacant jobs, business guidance or the establishment of personal reintegration guides, which also helps with managing expectations.

Having emphasized the lack of accreditation of the German journeymen certificates and its implications for public positions and university applications in both countries, Uganda and Rwanda, most interviewees did not experience big challenges. Some mentioned that the public employers tolerated their German certificates. Others shared their experience that anyway their technical skills would be better remunerated in private sector, which would not have any challenges with the German certificates.

According to three returnees, the public sector supports local university graduates in management positions, but not TVET graduates. There would be a preference to hiring international graduates than returning diaspora.

Theme 5 – Content with Return

The Ugandan participants have been undecided, whether they would have preferred to work in Germany or to remigrate home. On the contrary, the Rwandan returnees stated that they were content with their (re)migration history, including their decision to return home. There, they perceive life as easy, relaxed with a lot of joy, compared to the life in Germany, which they perceive mainly as hard work. The weather would be better than in Germany. Living expenses would be cheaper and job opportunities would be better. Salaries would be lower in Rwanda, being a disadvantage for formal employment and at the same time an advantage for entrepreneurial activities.

Most returnees from Uganda and Rwanda missed Germany, particularly the transportation system, the level of organization, specialized technical discussions or their friends. However, all returnees never really built a life in Germany. They had no financial investments in Germany. Thus, it was easy for them to leave Germany.

The interviewees advise young people to migrate to Germany for education with a clear vision and being strongly committed. In the case of Rwanda, there is a clear recommendation to return home at a later stage and to apply the learnt.

Theme 6 – Financial Stability after Return

Although most returnees admitted that they earn less money now, back home, than they would earn in Germany, they nevertheless had a good financial situation. As written above, they multiplied their monthly net salaries and were all in formal employment. Most interviewees were invested in their home country.

All returnees stated that they benefit from the skills gap in the home country. In the case of Rwanda, some interviewees explained that investments home are easier than in Germany, since the market would be more dynamic and labour would be cheaper. Most interviewees returned with savings.

Comparison – Cases 3 and 4

The reintegration experiences in the two home countries, Uganda and Rwanda, were similar for the two cases. There have been minor differences. Ugandans found less jobs on return compared to Rwandans, but they socially reintegrated more easily. All Rwandans were happy with their remigration, while at least half of the Ugandans would have preferred to stay in Germany for work. Ugandans emphasized, that their government does not provide any reintegration measures, while Rwandan mentioned a lot of reintegration measures already in place. Also, the Rwandan diaspora is more active from abroad. On return, Ugandans are more engaged in civil society than Rwandans, e. g. in business member organizations.

Discussion

In this section, the author first interprets the findings in the context of the four cases. Then, he relates them to the theory and the previous research, which have been discussed before.

Findings in Context to Cases 1 and 2

Since the integration experiences in Germany were similar in both cases, they are presented in a consolidated manner in this research. The author attributes this to cultural similarities: The countries are neighbours, cultural boundaries are minimal, and the languages are similar. Both countries are historically connected and each hosts a large expatriate community from the other.

This study reveals the complex integration experiences of Ugandan and Rwandan craft apprentices in Germany. Participants faced significant early challenges, including language barriers, administrative difficulties, cultural differences and limited social support. These obstacles were most pronounced during the initial apprenticeship phase.

Despite this, many apprentices showed resilience, relying on personal strategies like building friendships, joining diaspora or other networks and pursuing extra language learning. Informal support systems, such as mentors and community groups, played a key role in easing the transition.

Financial pressures from home also weighed heavily, but those who had received pre-departure orientation – particularly on finances and bureaucracy – adjusted more smoothly. Overall, the findings highlight that integration, though difficult, can be significantly improved through structured preparation, social support and personal initiative.

In the result section, the author mentioned minor differences between the two cases:

- Rwandans mentioned that administration was like home. This was not the case for Ugandans.
- Rwandans had more challenges with dialects than Ugandans. However, German was more challenging for Ugandans than for Rwandans.
- Personal support was not so important for Ugandans, same as quick reaction.
- Ugandans often had no challenges to integrate.

These differences can be explained by the different governance structures of both countries. Rwanda developed an administration with fast, clear and decentralized processes and services. In Uganda, there are few public services. Administrative services are bureaucratic and not clear. Service delivery strongly depends on goodwill and bribery.

The language history of both countries must be considered. Uganda was a British colony. Learning another European language is not common, while Rwanda was colonized by German and French speaking countries. Official language was shifted from French to English. Rwandans are used to learn foreign languages.

Lastly, Uganda is home to many ethnic groups. This fostered familiarity with cultural adaptation.

Findings in Context to Cases 3 and 4

As in cases 1 and 2, the reintegration experiences in Uganda and Rwanda were similar in both cases. Therefore, they are presented in a consolidated manner in this study. Once again, the author attributes this to cultural similarities, as previously explained for cases 1 and 2.

The reintegration of Ugandan and Rwandan returnees was largely successful in terms of employment, with many participants finding jobs immediately upon return. Many noted smoother workplace reintegration in their home country compared to integration in Germany, though social reintegration proved difficult.

Returnees faced minor obstacles due to the lack of formal recognition of German vocational certificates, e. g. limited access to public sector jobs and further education. Many returnees pursued entrepreneurial ventures or advisory roles. Participants emphasized the usefulness of soft skills gained in Germany, which gave them an edge in the home country's labour market.

Financially, while salaries were lower than in Germany, lower living costs and favourable business conditions created a sense of financial stability.

In the result section, the author mentioned minor differences between the two cases:

- Ugandans found fewer jobs upon return than Rwandans, but reintegrated socially with greater ease.
- All Rwandans were satisfied with their return, while at least half of the Ugandans would have preferred to stay in Germany for work.
- Ugandans reported a lack of government reintegration support, whereas Rwandans mentioned several existing measures.
- The Rwandan diaspora is more active abroad.
- Upon return, Ugandans are more engaged in civil society.

These differences can again be attributed to the distinct governance structures of both countries, as outlined in the previous section. Further explanations lie in societal and historical contexts. As previously noted, Uganda's ethnic diversity has fostered openness to foreign cultures. In contrast, Rwanda – shaped by its experience of overcoming genocide trauma – has evolved into a consensus-driven society.

Findings Related to Theory

This study's findings align with various migration, integration, reintegration and development theories. Neoclassical Economic Theory explains the participants' initial decision to migrate for vocational training based on economic rationality, though their post-arrival struggles reveal the theory's limitations in accounting for sociocultural barriers.

Migration Systems and Networks Theory is supported by the role of diaspora connections in facilitating access and integration into the German apprenticeship system. World Systems Theory helps explain feelings of marginalization, as structural labour integration did not guarantee full social inclusion.

Human Capital Theory is reflected in participants' pursuit of skills to improve employability, yet limited recognition of their qualifications highlights institutional barriers. Social Capital Theory is confirmed by the importance of personal support networks in improving integration outcomes. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is evident in how institutional environments influenced apprentices' experiences.

Tinto's Student Integration Model explains how connection to mentors and institutions boosted belonging and motivation, while a lack of support led to exclusion.

Regarding reintegration, Preparedness Theory is confirmed, as participants' ability to reintegrate economically and socially was highly dependent on the accumulation and mobilization of human, social and financial capital gained abroad. The Typology of Return Migration is also applicable, as participants' return motives ranged from economic opportunity to lifestyle preference.

Finally, the findings reflect elements of Modernization Theory, especially in Rwanda, where returning skilled migrants are seen as agents of economic transformation. At the same time, Dependency Theory is partially supported by existing institutional barriers, e. g. lack of certificate recognition.

Together, these frameworks reveal that successful (re)integration depends on individual effort and skills, as well as on social networks, institutional recognition and supportive environments.

Findings Related to Previous Research

This section compares the qualitative study's findings with previous research on Rwandan TVET migrants in Germany. Several prior findings were confirmed, including challenges related to low technical and language skills, German work culture, discrimination and administrative hurdles – especially regarding visas and family reunification. Mitigation strategies like contextual preparation, cultural orientation and individualized onboarding were also validated. New findings include the importance of learning regional dialects and tailoring preparation to regional contexts.

While previous research cited difficulties in income, medical care and job opportunities, the qualitative study contradicted these; participants reported financial stability and equal job access.

A key new insight is the critical role of personal support networks in easing integration, helping overcome visa, financial and cultural challenges. Participants also suggested creating a centralized public office to streamline administrative processes. Based on these findings, the study recommends that the German embassies in Uganda and Rwanda host networking events to connect potential migrants with German institutions. Overall, the research expands prior knowledge and underscores the need for practical, localized preparation and personal support systems to improve integration outcomes.

Conclusion

TVET migration from Africa, particularly from Rwanda and Uganda to Germany, can be more successful than migration of fully qualified workforce. Its benefit is that the German companies can design the training of the migrated apprentice according to their needs, instead of working with someone, who already studied his profession in another context and might not be ready to learn again.

Rwanda and Uganda benefited from successfully integrated apprentices in Germany, e. g. by continuous remittances. Also, most graduates return home and contribute to brain gain, since they left their home country only with basic skills and returned with expert skills. Their successful reintegration will benefit the local economy.

In the following, the author summarizes his key findings. First, the most important factor for successful (re)integration is good preparation, focusing on language skills for integration and technical / business guidance for reintegration.

Second, the character and motivation of each individual are key factors, which lead to successful or unsuccessful (re)integration.

Third, (re)integration becomes easier, the more welcome and confident the migrant feels. Previous migration experiences and knowledge additionally build his or her confidence.

Fourth, mingling in non-homogeneous groups of friends, consisting of foreigners and locals, helps to learn the best of each culture and therefore is an important tool for (re)integration in any country.

In the following, the limitations of this research are discussed briefly. It is mainly limited by the low number of research participants and therefore not generalizable. However, this was not the research aim, but to add knowledge in the context of the four selected cases. There are two reasons for the low number of research participants. First, up to now, only a few thousand Rwandan and Ugandan nationals graduated apprenticeship in the crafts sector in Germany. Second, due to data protection law, it is very difficult to identify them.

Future research should apply the same methodology, but focus on a bigger sample. The sample size could be increased by focusing on additional East African countries, also to identify differences among them. In addition, the experiences of other involved actors could contribute to generalizability.

This research may guide the relevant stakeholders to anticipate and mitigate integration challenges of East African TVET migrants in Germany as well as their reintegration challenges on return in East Africa after graduation. Relevant stakeholders were identified in the East African home countries as well as in Germany, being policymakers, embassies, public authorities, private sector representations, employers, training providers and civil society.

This research might consecutively contribute to economic development and youth employment in partaking African countries as well as sustainable reduction of skills shortage in Germany.

Bibliography

- Acosta, A. (2010). Education and dependency: Rethinking development in Latin America. *Journal of Education and Development*, 25(3), 43-59.
- Adedeji, A., & Bullinger, M. (2019). Subjective integration and quality of life of Sub-Saharan African migrants in Germany. *Public Health*, 174, 134-144.
- Backhaus, A. (2020). *Skills in African Labor Markets and Implications for Migration to Europe*.
- Becker, E. (2024). Migration and Cultural Integration in Germany. *International Journal of Sociology*, 8(2), 25- 35.
- Becker, E., Graf, J., Heß, B., & Huber, M. (2023). *Entwicklung der Fachkräftemigration und Auswirkungen des beschleunigten Fachkräfteverfahrens: Begleitforschung zum Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz (Vol. 45)*.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development : experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Cassarino, J.-P. (2004). Theorising return migration: The conceptual approach to return migrants revisited. *International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, 6(2), 253–279.
- Clemens, M., Dempster, H., & Gough, K. (2019). Maximizing the shared benefits of legal migration pathways: lessons from Germany's skills partnerships. *Center for global development policy paper*, 150.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design : qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- European Commission. (2005). *European Charter for Researchers*.
- European Commission. (2022). *MITTEILUNG DER KOMMISSION AN DAS EUROPÄISCHE PARLAMENT, DEN RAT, DEN EUROPÄISCHEN WIRTSCHAFTS- UND SOZIALAUSSCHUSS UND DEN AUSSCHUSS DER REGIONEN - Anwerbung qualifizierter Arbeitskräfte aus Drittländern*.
- European Commission. (2024). *COMMUNICATION FROM THE*

- COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS - *Labour and skills shortages in the EU: an action plan.*
- Frank, A. G. (1969). *Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical studies of Chile and Brazil.* Monthly Review Press.
- Froehlich, L., & Schulte, I. (2019). Warmth and competence stereotypes about immigrant groups in Germany. *Plos one*, 14(9), e0223103.
- Handwerkskammer Niederbayern-Oberpfalz. (2024). *Was ist Handwerk?*
- Idemudia, E., & Boehnke, K. (2020). *Psychosocial experiences of African migrants in six European countries: A mixed method study.* Springer Nature.
- International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training. (2024). *TVETipedia Glossary.*
- International Labour Organization. (2024). *The International Standard Classification of Occupations- ISCO-08.*
- International Organization for Migration. (2019). *Glossary on Migration.*
- King, R. (2000). *Generalizations from the history of return migration - Return migration: Journey of hope or despair?* International Organization for Migration.
- Rostow, W. W. (1960). *The stages of economic growth: A non-communist manifesto.* Cambridge University Press.
- Russ, M. (2014). *Value creation, reporting, and signaling for human capital and human assets : building the foundation for a multi-disciplinary, multi-level theory.* Palgrave Macmillan.
- Smith, A. (2008). Development theory and the limitations of modernization. *Global Perspectives on Development*, 12(4), 114-126.
- Studthoff, A., Thomann, B., Niediek, S., & Shahin, S. (2024). *Einwanderung in die Ausbildung - Möglichkeiten und Herausforderungen der gezielten Gewinnung, Vorbereitung und Integration von Auszubildenden aus Drittstaaten. BIBB Discussion Paper.*
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college : rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Tomingas, A. M. L. (2025). *Qualitative Survey - Experiences of Returning Rwandese after Apprenticeship in Germany.*
- Triandafyllidou, A. (2023). *Routledge handbook of immigration and refugee studies* (Second edition. ed.). Routledge.
- World Bank. (2023). *GDP per capita (current US\$).*