

The Changing Role of Student Mobility

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1. Introduction

Increasing student mobility tends to be viewed in debates on the developments of higher education at first glance as one of the most undisputed positive goals. Mobility is perceived as a most suitable way of getting access to study provisions academically superior to those at home or in areas of specialisation hardly available at home; in those cases the term “vertical mobility” might be appropriate. Moreover, mobility between countries and institutions of higher education of more or less the same level of academic quality, i.e. “horizontal mobility”, is perceived as offering the opportunity to widen the horizon through experiencing contrasting academic environments and to enhance one’s intercultural understanding.

It is interesting to note that the ambitious reforms underway in Europe of creating a European Higher Education Area by 2010, notably through a convergent system of levels of study programmes and degrees but also through various other accompanying reforms, were called for primarily because they were expected to extend and strengthen student mobility. The Bologna Declaration of 1999 called for the reforms primarily in order to increase the attractiveness of higher education in European countries for students from outside Europe as well as in order to facilitate intra-European student mobility.

A closer look, however, reveals, first, that student mobility is expected to serve so various expectations that this might be a case of unrealistic over-expansion and over-stretching of functions. Second, student mobility is recently more frequently assessed controversially: “brain drain”, “commercialisation of trans-national higher education”, “flooding by foreign students”, risks for quality of higher education and other sceptical judgements are put forward in this context.

Both, the high expectations and the increasing scepticism with respect to student mobility call for a closer look at the actual trends of student mobility, the factors stimulating and discouraging student mobility, the outcomes of student mobility, and the controversial issues recently debated in this area.

2. The Varied Objectives of Student Mobility

Student mobility is not a recent phenomenon. Historians suggest that about one tenth of students in the medieval universities had come from other countries.

Five different objectives of international student mobility are emphasized most frequently at present, some already for more than a century and some quite recently.

- First, highly reputed universities and scholars attract students from other countries who aim to benefit from study provisions on a higher level of quality than those at home or in an area of specialisation not available at home. This type of mobility played already a role in the 19th century and remained important until now.
- Second, we noted in the past or note today a colonial or post-colonial flow of students from colonies and developing countries to more advanced higher education systems in economically advanced countries where political ties often played a substantial role in determining the flows between country of origin and country of study. Often, student mobility is intended to and possibly turns out to be the first step towards migration.

- Third, some students spend their period of study in a neighbouring country – a less risky option, whereby the motives might vary. This type of mobility has a long tradition, and it can be observed in various regions within Europe today (Nordic countries, German-speaking countries and regions, Francophone countries and regions, between Ireland and the United Kingdom, between Flemish-speaking Belgium and the Netherlands, between the Czech Republic and Slovakia etc. as well as outside Europe between Latin-American countries, between Arab-speaking countries etc.). Certainly, efforts to promote and facilitate intra-European mobility are also viewed by some political actors as means of creating a similar understanding of neighbour relationships across Europe or even as steps towards European integration.
- Fourth, short-term study in other countries in order to learn from academically and culturally somewhat but possibly not too much contrasting countries and institutions and in order to increase mutual understanding got momentum after World War II when the United States promoted short-term student exchange between the U.S. and Europe. Activities by the Council of Europe already in the 1950s to facilitate recognition of study achievements and degrees acquired in other European countries were based on similar objectives. Obviously, short-term mobility of this kind works best if the mobility is “horizontal”, i.e. if the quality of study programmes and level of competences between the students of the home and host country are similar. Last but not least these objectives played a major role when ERASMUS support for short-term mobility within Europe was inaugurated in 1987.
- Fifth, we note an increasing interest of universities in recent years to attract foreign students for financial reasons. For example, public policies in the U.S., the United Kingdom and Australia of funding higher education in general as well as policies of not funding study provisions for the majority of foreign students led to a vested financial interest on the part of many institutions of higher education to attract foreign students paying high fees. In many other countries, an increasing number of actors strive for more foreign students as well as a means to enhance the academic reputation of the respective institution of higher education which eventually might turn out to be financially beneficial as well.

This short overview clearly underscores that mobility might serve quite divergent purposes for the mobile students. Also, we note that the actors involved – governments, institutions of higher education, teachers and students – might have divergent intentions in mind. Obviously, the mix of objectives and actual activities of student mobility have changed over time.

In recent years, the public discourse in Europe about the virtue of short-term student mobility (the ERASMUS debate), about structural convergence for increasing student mobility (the BOLOGNA debate) and about mobility under conditions of increasing competition between universities, among others the impact of tuition fees on the universities’ mobility policies and the increasing trans-national trade of higher education provisions (the GATS debate), might lead observers to believe that views and activities as regards student mobility developed similarly across Europe. A recent comparative study, however, shows that internationalisation policies vary substantially between the various European countries and within the European countries between the individual institutions of higher education (Huisman/van der Wende 2004, 2005).

3. Growth of Student Mobility

According to statistics collected by UNESCO and other supra-national agencies, the number of foreign students in European countries increased from almost 500,000 in 1985 – when the decision was made to launch the ERASMUS programme – about 1.2 million in 2003. The number of students from European countries studying abroad increased during this period

from about 200,000 to about 600,000. As the absolute number of students in Europe grew during this period by more than three quarters, the increase of the proportion of foreign students was less impressive than one might expect. The proportion of foreigners among students in Europe actually grew during this period from about 4 percent to somewhat more than 5 percent, and the number of European students studying abroad increased from somewhat more than 2 percent to somewhat less than 3 percent (cf. UNESCO 1988; Kelo, Teichler and Wächter 2003).

Data published by UNESCO, OECD and various U.S. and European agencies on “foreign students”, “study abroad”, “international students” and “student mobility” are by no means perfect. Two problems are most deplorable:

- Many countries do not include short-term mobile students, i.e. students spending a semester or a year in another country, in their educational statistics.
- Most countries present only the number of foreign students (defined by “citizenship”, “nationality”, “passport”). Ironically, the more student mobility grows, the less statistics of foreign students are useful as an indicator of international student mobility, because a considerable number of foreign students already has lived and possibly attended a secondary school in the country of study and because some students who are citizens of the country of study have lived and attended school abroad before returning to their country of citizenship for the purpose of study.

Where statistics are available in Europe both, on nationality and mobility, and both, on short-term and long-term mobility, we note that up to about one third of foreign students had not been mobile, up to about one tenth of the mobile students were not foreign and up to about half of the mobile students were short-term mobile students not registered in official student statistics (cf. Kelo/Teichler/Wächter 2006).

The actual frequency of short-term student mobility can be established best by surveying students close to graduation or to survey recent graduates. However, only a few countries collect respective data. For example, the proportion of German students shortly prior to graduation who had studied abroad for some period, increased from 6 percent in 1991 to 15 percent in 2003 (according to surveys undertaken by Hochschul-Informations-System).

On the basis of the incomplete data available we might guess that

- one out of about 40 European students decide to study the whole study programme abroad; this proportion has increased only moderately over the most recent two decades; the majority of these students study in another European country;
- one out of about 10 European students spend a short period of study in another – in most cases European – country at some point in time during their course of study; this proportion has increased substantially over the recent two decades;
- less than one out of 30 students in Europe had come from other regions of the world to Europe for the purpose of study; this proportion increased over the recent two decades, whereby the growth rate since about 2000 is somewhat higher than in previous years.

These rates seem to be smaller than one might expect on the basis of the public debates in Europe as regards the desirability of student mobility. On the other hand, these rates are higher for Europe than, for example, for the United States of America and for Japan.

Mobility across borders during the course of study often is opted for by students and often promoted by other actors in order to increase international professional mobility. Available statistics show that about five percent of higher-education trained persons in the labour of the European Union are foreigners. As will be shown below, internationally mobile students clearly more frequently work abroad than those who had studied in the country of their citizenship.

Altogether, we should bear in mind that efforts for increasing student mobility across Europe have not led to similar ratios of student mobility. Again, due to lack of data, we can refer in this context to available data according to citizenship: The ratio of foreign students among all students was highest in 2003 in the small countries Liechtenstein and Cyprus. Among countries with more than one million inhabitants, ratios of more than ten percent of foreign students were reported from Switzerland, Austria, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany on France, while ratios of less than two percent from the majority of Central and Eastern European countries. Study abroad ratio were higher than nine percent among Bulgarian, Slovakian, Greek and Irish students as compared to less than two percent among Spanish, British and Polish students (Kelo/Teichler/Wächter 2006, pp. 15-16).

4. Short-term Mobility: ERASMUS and Beyond

Short-term intra-European student mobility spread substantially as a consequence of the establishment of ERASMUS programme in 1987. The number of students annually supported increased from about 30,000 around 1990 to almost 150,000 in 2004. Precise information on short-term student mobility not supported by ERASMUS does not exist, but available information suggests that it grew as well substantially and that it remained until today more frequent than mobility supported by ERASMUS.

The ERASMUS scheme for the mobility of students is generally viewed as a “success story”. Even though bureaucratic procedures of the programme were often criticized as excessive and even though the stipends provided for students as a rule cover only part of the additional costs for study abroad, ERASMUS became quite popular. Short-term study in another European country is stimulated for the purpose of academic enhancement, cultural enrichment and improvement of foreign language proficiency and fostering the “European dimension” of higher education. The individual cooperating institutions of higher education and departments are free to set more specific targets, as long as they take care to facilitate life and study of the mobile students and take measure to ensure recognition upon return of the study achievements abroad.

Various evaluation studies have shown almost all participating students are highly satisfied with the ERASMUS experience in another European country. On average, they believe that their study progress abroad was higher than during a corresponding period at home, and many students report a substantial enhancement of proficiency in the host country language. About 70-80 percent of their study achievements abroad are recognized upon return. About 20 percent of the students experienced financial, administrative and accommodation problems, while academic problems are less frequently stated (see the overview of results in Teichler 2002).

As students of the 2nd, 4th and 12th cohorts of ERASMUS students were sent similar questionnaires, the evaluation studies could examine change over time. Actually, the results of the various surveys were strikingly similar. Obviously, neither the expansion of the number of students supported undermined the outcomes nor did the continuity of the programme lead to progress through experience. Only the extent of recognition increased moderately with the spread of the credit system ECTS.

Studies addressing the professional impact on short-term mobile students in Europe show that the study period abroad turned out to be helpful in the job search process. With respect of income and status, formerly mobile students do not perceive any clear advantage to formerly non-mobile students. Two professional effects of short-term student mobility are most striking: Almost 20 percent are professionally active abroad a few years after graduation as compared to only about 3 percent of formerly non-mobile students, and formerly mobile students not employed abroad take over clearly more visible international work assignments such as communicating with foreigners, using foreign languages, travelling abroad for professional purposes, using knowledge on other countries etc.

However, a recent study (Bracht et al. 2006) indicates that the impact of short-term study in another European country of leading more frequently to visible international work assignment has diminished over time. The authors discuss two possible causes for this phenomenon. First, short-term student mobility might have expanded more rapidly than the demand for competences fostered. Second, international experiences and learning might spread so much as a consequence of a general internationalisation and globalisation of European society that the comparative advantage of short-term study abroad for enhancing international competences is bound to decline. The latter interpretation clearly argues that a persistent programme supporting student mobility with stable quality such as notably ERASMUS is not likely to yield the same level of results, because student mobility is increasingly losing its exclusivity in enhancing international competences.

The European Union has decided to extend and to expand its support for student mobility. ERASMUS will continue as sub-programme while the name of the umbrella educational support programme will be Life Long Learning programme from late 2007 onwards instead of SOCRATES (from 1995 to 2007). The number of European students awarded ERASMUS support might double in the next few years.

5. The Bologna Process and Student Mobility

The reform agenda of the so-called “Bologna Process” cannot be described easily because the process starting with the 1998 Sorbonne Declaration of ministers from four countries within the subsequent almost ten years a growing number of countries (45 signed the Bergen Communiqué in 2005), moved towards an increasing degree of “institutionalisation and formalisation”, and is characterized by continuous “broadening of the policy agenda with the subsequent addition of further targets” (Witte 2006, p. 124).

The Bologna Declaration itself is so much a document of compromise that the objectives stated leave ample room for interpretation: to construct a “European Higher Education Area”, to promote citizens’ mobility and employability”, to achieve “greater compatibility and comparability of the systems of higher education” and to increase the “international competitiveness of the European system of higher education” as well as its “world-wide degree of attraction” (ibid, p. 131). The Bologna Declaration calls for six lines of action: adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees (e.g. Diploma Supplement), introduction of a system of levels of study programmes and degrees, establishment of a system of credits, promotion of student mobility through the reduction of existing barriers, promotion of cooperation in matters of quality assurance, and promotion of the European dimensions in higher education. Most experts analysing the official and semi-official documents of the Bologna Process agree that the establishment of a convergent structure of the study programmes and degrees is the single most emphasized operational objective of the Bologna Process, and that the aims of making Europe more attractive to students from other parts of the world and to facilitate intra-European mobility are most strongly pronounced.

Interim accounts of the Bologna Process half way between Bologna Declaration and the target year of 2010 for the realisation of a European Higher Education Area suggest that the European countries move – though with different speed – towards the implementation of a convergent structure of study programmes and degrees and towards the introduction or extension of other measures called for in the Bologna Declaration. The Bologna Process became triggered off manifold reforms on the level of the individual higher education institutions, where the debates has move from an “whether or not” towards an “how” of the convergent structure. However, structures seem to become less similar than initially expected, and it is still open how various measures targeted at the quality and the substance of study programmes eventually put their footprint on the curricula, the teaching and learning processes and eventually on the competences upon graduation (see Reichert/Tauch 2005; Alesi et al. 2005; Kehm/Teichler 2006).

As regards the impact on world-wide mobility, we note an increase of the number of students in Europe originating from other areas of the world since the late 1990s as compared to most of the 1990s. But it is not possible to attribute it clearly to an increased “attractiveness” of European higher education, for two other factors have to be taken into consideration: a growing “push” effect of increased demand for study abroad in China, India and other countries, and a loss of attractiveness of U.S. higher education for foreign students as a consequence of the tighter process of granting visa for study in the wake of security measures after the 11 September 2001 incident.

As regards intra-European mobility, views vary as regards a beneficial impact of the Bologna process. On the one hand, many institutions of higher education establish new study programmes in the English language, introduce credits and Diploma Supplements, establish joint degree programmes and are convinced that a modularisation facilitates the admission of students from other European countries who want to study abroad temporarily or want to switch permanently to an institution of higher education during their course of study. Also, many governments took steps towards reducing barriers, such as establishing an intra-European or generally international portability of scholarships. On the other hand, a survey aiming to establish the impact of the Bologna process on student mobility showed a widespread concern. Of the representatives of European higher institutions surveyed, more than a quarter each agreed to the statements

- “the short duration of the study programme will lead to a decrease in the number of students going abroad to study or do an internship” (27%),
- “the curriculum is too dense to enable students to go abroad for a limited period of time” (26%), and
- “the curriculum of the study programme is not flexible enough to carry out part of the courses abroad” (26%).

The study, however, showed that these concerns varied substantially by country (Bürger et al., p. 29).

6. Student Mobility under Conditions of Increasing Competition between Universities

The Bologna Declaration of 1999 signed by European ministers in charge of higher education of the majority of European countries calls for increasing international “competitiveness” of the European higher education system, and heads of European governments and the European Commission, according to their Lisbon Declaration of 2000, even wanted to make Europe the “most competitive knowledge economy” by the year 2010.

We have reasons to assume that the politicians using these terms are not primarily interested in increasing “competitiveness” in terms of changing process, attitudes and interaction, but rather use “competitiveness” for expressing their desire that higher education in Europe should become the “best” in the world, whereby increasing competition is seen as the means to ensure the rise to the top. In addition, the term “competition” often is used to express that higher education in Europe should be on top according to worldwide criteria and thus adapt itself to those seen as leading before this surge of quality; some critics point out, in contrast, that European higher education might be more attractive if it underscores its strengths which are not necessarily the worldwide criteria for “competitiveness”, but, for example, cultural depth, multi-lingualism and diversity (see Scott 2005).

According to the current state of knowledge, the links between increased competition in higher education and stimulation or facilitation of student mobility is not as clear as sweeping political statements suggest (cf. van Vught/van der Wende/Westerheijden 2002; OECD 2004; Teichler 2004; Knight 2006). The following observations might call for a more complex understanding of the links between competition and growth of student mobility.

First, it certainly fits the current “Zeitgeist” to assume that increasing competition as a rule leads to higher quality in higher education. However, experts also point out counterproductive consequences of over-competition, increasing imitation behaviour among the institutions and scholars not having reached the top, efforts to improve according to indicators than according to substance, increasing activities of deliberate des-information. But as long as increasing competition leads to increasing quality, it is generally assumed that this also raises the attractiveness for foreign students to move to these institutions.

Second, institutions of higher education aiming to enhance their “competitiveness” within given financial frameworks are not necessarily inclined to increase student mobility. They have less academic and administrative “control” of their outgoing students, and admitting larger numbers of foreign students might require more administrative, consultative and academic support and might imply greater risks of the quality of learning and of successful graduation than keeping large proportions of home country students.

Third, as higher education is funded to a substantial extent by national public means in the European countries, one cannot expect a willingness to fund an unlimited growth of foreign students. This is not only obvious in Austria where a European intervention in 2005 forced Austrian universities to admit vast numbers of German “Numerus clausus refugees” in medical education. The more international student mobility grows the more individual European countries might be tempted to look for ways of reducing the financial burden of foreign students.

Fourth, if frameworks are established in individual countries for differential tuition fees according to the students’ nationality or origin, this creates incentives for discrimination in admission policies according to nationality or origin. For example, the regulatory system with regards to tuition fees creates incentives for “competitive” British universities to strive for an increase of “overseas students”, to accept free-moving students from EU countries with somewhat less enthusiasm than national students and to avoid taking ERASMUS students because they are expected to pay tuition fees, if at all, only at home.

Fifth, institutions of higher education might aim to increase their market through “transnational” or “cross-border” higher education, i.e. through various means of offering their programmes (through branch campuses or programmes, franchising of programmes, distance education etc.) to students living in other countries. Views vary whether this mobility of programmes reduces physical mobility of students or supplements it without any repercussion to physical student mobility.

Sixth, finally, increasing competition between universities is generally expected to cause increasing vertical diversity of higher education. The widespread advocacy of “rankings” and “league tables” takes for granted that “transparency” of quality leads to increasing quality awareness of consumers and more targeted choices and, in effect, to steeper quality differences between institutions of higher education. This, however, counteracts the spirit of the Bologna Process which calls for facilitating student mobility across European systems, because the more highly stratified a higher education system is, the smaller are the “zones of mutual trust”, i.e. the number of universities and departments viewed as offering a similar level quality as the own one’s.

The more student mobility takes in a competitive environment among institutions of higher education and the more diverse vertically and possibly horizontally the study provisions become, the more the concern grows about the “quality” or the “qualities” provided. And even most of the strongest advocates of competition in higher education as mechanism of stimulating quality do not trust market regulation as successfully assuring quality to the mobile students. As quality of higher education is “controlled” primarily on a national level, concern was bound to increase the guarantee that the mobile students are not “cheated”. The issue of quality gained momentum increasingly momentum in the communiqués of conferences taking

place in the Bologna Process. International organisations try to set guidelines for the quality of “transnational” and “cross-border” education (see UNESCO 2006), efforts are made to establish international accreditation activities, “rankings” are put forward to demonstrate top quality, but altogether it is clear that the increased emphasis on competition increases the risks for mobile students as far as the academic conditions are concerned under which they study in another country.

Altogether, we note that efforts to increase competition in higher education do not consistently lead to the readiness to promote student mobility. This notwithstanding, it is obvious that competition is a strong driver with respect to student mobility. For example, when ERASMUS became a success story many institutions of higher education wanted to excel with respect to large proportions of student mobility, although the financial support was small. And some ranking studies are based on the assumption that high rates of foreign students indicates the quality of university and information about these rates will further stimulate efforts to accommodate even more foreign students. It is obvious, though, that the conditions for this competition vary substantially in Europe by country and by individual institution, and national policies in Europe continue to differ strikingly in the extent to which they provide support, set incentives and regulate student mobility. We have no evidence up to the present that national policies towards student mobility are clearly converging.

7. Concluding Observations

Obviously, student mobility is a major aim of higher education policy in Europe since about two decades. The ERASMUS programme of the European Commission, inaugurated in 1987, has played a major role in popularising short-term student mobility in Europe; decisions were made recently to enlarge this support programme even further. The Bologna Declaration 1999 of European ministers in charge of higher education calls for convergent structures of study programmes and degrees notably because this reform is expected to increase attractiveness of European universities for students from all parts of the world and to facilitate intra-European mobility. Looking at these two programmes, we might be tempted to conclude that an increase of student mobility is generally appreciated and strongly supported by policy measures and that is clearly on the increase.

In the various European countries, we note divergent policies to promote student mobility. They range from support programmes for students from developing countries via general incentives for increasing the ratios of foreign students towards the permission to charge exceptionally high fees exclusively from “overseas” students.

As far as actual increase assumed, we have to bear in mind that the state of information is deplorable because most countries only collect data on foreign students and often do not include short-term mobile students. We can infer, however, that “degree mobility”, i.e. study in another country for a whole study programme, among European students has only increased moderately. Degree mobility of students from other parts of the world has increased in recent years, but this can be attributed only in part to the changes in the Bologna Process. Short-term mobility within Europe seems to grow most clearly. Altogether, the ratio of incoming and outgoing students remains extremely diverse in the various European countries. Notably, most higher education institutions in Central and Eastern European countries face difficulties in attracting students from other countries, and among Western European countries, few British and Spanish students are internationally mobile for the purpose of study.

It is widely assumed that policies such as ERASMUS support for student mobility and the Bologna Process as well as general political efforts to stimulate competition among higher education are key drivers for the increase of international student mobility. Obviously, ERASMUS was a key driver for student mobility; a recent study, however, warns that the professional value of this programme is on the decline because study in another country gradually loses its exceptionality as compared to general experiences of internationalisation

and globalisation affecting the daily life of others. Certainly, all the reforms surrounding the Bologna Process are favourable for the growth of student mobility; many higher education institutions, however, come to the conclusion that the Bachelor-Master structure and various curricular strategies associated to it discourage temporary student mobility. Finally, the increasing emphasis on competition stimulates activities to attract more mobile students in general or specific sub-groups of mobile students in some respects, but also discourage activities of taking foreign students or at least sub-groups of them in other respects. Obviously, national policies in the various European countries continue to play an enormous role regarding the extent to which mobility is encouraged, whether efforts are made to reach a balance of incoming and outgoing students or not, what sub-groups of students are encouraged to be mobile etc. Altogether, one should not overlook that student mobility is only one mode of international learning. Student mobility is likely to grow in the future, but many experts predict that “trans-national” or “border-crossing” mobility of study programmes as well as “internationalisation at home” will increase in the future at a more rapid pace than physical mobility of students.

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