

STUDENT MOBILITY FLOWS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract:

Knowledge streams of any kind (vertical or horizontal) have become essential to the modern knowledge society, changing and impacting the future development of each higher education system and causally the process itself. This paper focuses on reviewing approaches to mobility flows. In the literature we identified four main approaches, although many other theoretical approaches are also in place. They can be categorized in four main categories; a) studies with the focus on determinants on mobility – push and pull factors adopted from the migration theory; b) studies focusing on the labour market and human capital theory – to attract the brightest students; c) studies that place attention to cross-border, internationalization and globalisation processes and d) studies focusing on world system theories. These frameworks are not mutually exclusive and can be easily complemented and correlated. The identified theoretical approaches are most used and can be helpful to other scholars who research the same topic.

Keywords: mobility, students, Erasmus, internationalization, Europe

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions were always referred to as storages of knowledge; with their traditional and fundamental role of generating and transmitting knowledge to the society, not bound or limited to any borders (Teichler, 2009) and are therefore being international by its nature (De Witt, 2011, p. 16). Last decade has been clearly marked with a shift in the focus from mass higher education enrolment to widening access and finally to internationalization of higher education as a consequence of globalisation. Promoting student mobility was by far the most supported instrument by European higher education policy makers to foster internationalization processes in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). From the 1970s onwards European authorities placed much attention to stimulate cross-border mobility first within the borders of Europe and since mid-1990s on the worldwide scale, mostly to strengthen Europe's position in the global economy (Teichler, 2009, p. 12, Adams and de Witt, 2011, p.32). European Community Action Scheme for Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) established in 1987 made a significant contribution to that aim, providing grants to boost student mobility, developing intercultural competencies and promoting the European dimension and collaboration (Sackmann, 2006; Teichler, 2009, p. 8).

ERASMUS programme enjoys enormous success in promoting internationalization activities, transnational and cross-border cooperation between EHEA countries, resulting from the ECTS credit system and recognition procedures in the frame of Bologna process. The increasing student mobility is by far the largest and the "long-standing form" of cross-border education (Knight, 2009, p. 185) and therefore being the most visible element influencing students and higher education institutions at both ends of mobility channels (Sackmann, 2006).

In the literature, several types of student mobility are defined. For instance, Teichler (2009, p. 13) refers to vertical mobility as »inward mobility from other parts of the world, from a lower to an advanced educational level«, and horizontal mobility as intra-European mobility between programmes of equal value. On the other hand, types of mobility are often characterized with the duration of the period spend abroad: degree mobility "as long term mobility of students with the purpose of completing a whole study cycle and the acquisition of a degree abroad", including undertaking a part in the jointly awarded degree programme and credit mobility as "a temporary enrolment abroad with the aim of pursuing one's studies but finishing them in the home country" (Grabher et al, 2014, p. 9; ECTS user's guide, 2015, p. 68).

Another distinction can be made with the reference to the mobility flow: incoming or outward mobility. Incoming mobility can be referred to mobility to the country of destination as "the country where the student moves to" and outward mobility as mobility from the country of origin as "the country from where the student moves" (European Commission, 2012, p. 153). Under the most recent Erasmus + programme, the term *learning mobility* was introduced for the mobility of students, staff, trainees, apprentices, volunteers, youth workers and young people for the purpose of learning. The ECTS user's guide (2015, p. 72) defines learning mobility as "physical mobility in which the learner moves to an institution in another country" and virtual mobility where learners participate through organized joined or shared curriculum or thought in Open Universities, Open Education Resources, MOOCs or other on-line material.

This paper deals with student mobility in a European setting. Theoretical approaches were identified by literature review and categorized in four main groups. Although the topic on student mobility in this paper is by no means exhaustive, it can be useful to gain a quick overview of research already done. In the next section, we provide a literature review of the most used approaches to student mobility flows by other researchers. We have identified four main theoretical approaches. In the last section we give a discussion and conclusions on student mobility flows with emphasis on European mobility scheme.

2. A LITERATURE REVIEW OF APPROACHES TO MOBILITY

Much research was already carried out on student mobility flows and patterns involving Erasmus mobility. They can be categorized in four main categories; a) studies with the focus on determinants on mobility – push and pull factors adopted from the migration theory; b) studies focusing on the labour market and human capital theory – to attract the brightest students; c) studies that place attention to cross-border, internationalization and globalisation processes and d) studies focusing on world system theories. These frameworks are not mutually exclusive and can be easily complemented and correlated. The above listed theories are not exhaustive as many other approaches are in place. We only provide a review of theoretical approaches that are most used.

2.1 Studies with the focus on push and pull factors (drivers and barriers)

Most studies on student mobility focuses on identifying the determinants of student mobility, providing a list of *push and pull factors* which serve as drivers and barriers to participate in mobility programmes (Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014; Caruso & de Wit, 2015; Beerkens et al, 2016, Gonzalez et al., 2011, Souto Otero, 2008). These studies analyse individual decisions or perceptions of mobile and non-mobile students. A complex set of educational, political, cultural, economic and academic factors provide a push and pull frame (Caruso & de Wit, 2015, p. 268-269). A variety and quality of educational provision and education opportunities, the prospect of employability, financial support (Li and Bray 2007), political stability, economic growth, wage differentials, job opportunities, and the facilitation of immigration are some of the factors pulling students towards a particular host country, typically economically developed and/or English-speaking countries (Wolfeil 2009; Barnett et al. 2016, Caruso & de Wit, 2015). In contrast, negative economic, political, and social characteristics such as economic recession, political conflict, and social unrest push students out of their home countries (Kondakci et al. 2016).

Students involved in exchange programmes are also influenced by motivational factors, such as social, emotional and functional factors. Both, social (relationships with instructors, students, social networks etc.) and emotional factors (having fun, proud to participate, boosting confidence etc.) play a major role as well as functional factors (facilities, infrastructure, timetables etc.) (Curras et al., 2015, p. 4013) when considering to participate in the Erasmus exchange programme. In addition, political, cultural and academic motives also affect the mobility flows. Papatsiba (2006, p. 99) states that student mobility promotes a single European labour market and helps to develop a joint European consciousness - creating European citizens. Student mobility can be therefore seen as an instrument for professional and personal development gaining international competences and soft skills (learn a foreign language, intercultural experience, autonomy, self-confidence, adventure, critical thinking etc.) useful for economy and society (Papatsiba, 2006, p. 99). Key motivations are considered a) gaining inter-cultural skills and personal development and b) increasing competitiveness in the labour market (Beerkens et al., 2016). The study of Beerkens et al. (2016) also reveals that students participating in Erasmus programme are similar regarding identified barriers and drivers. No country-specific differences were found (at a student level) when comparing Erasmus and non-Erasmus participants (p. 199).

2.2 Studies focusing on the labour market and human capital theory

Research of labour market migration revealed evidence of the mobility exchange programmes having substantial effect on the labour market (Gonzalez et al. 2011; Brandenburg et al. 2014, European Union, 2016; Parey & Waldinger, 2008) or on student's future career prospects (Potts, 2015). The Erasmus impact study (2014, p. 115) showed that "the risk of long-term unemployment after graduation was half as likely for Erasmus students than for non-mobile students." Moreover, Voin and Gerard (2013) found that participating in an exchange programme increases a student's chance to be mobile on the international labour market by 9 to 12.5 percentage points. The findings also show that short term exchange programme experience is "a good investment" for student's future which boost their self-confidence and "enables them to do their current or future job better" (Curras et al., 2015, p. 4014). From the human capital perspective study abroad can be treated as an investment with an expectation that such experience will produce future economic returns (better job opportunity; increase the future expected income).

Most recently European commission launched a communique on *Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture*, where *investing in education* is considered a key priority in European context as a "driver for jobs, economic growth and improved welfare and supports upward economic and social convergence both between and within Member States" (European Commission, 2017a, p. 10). Student mobility policies can be treated as a mechanism for developed countries to attract highly skilled workforce (Guellec & Cervantes, 2001). While the Erasmus impact studies (Brandenburg et al. 2014; European Union, 2016) focused on the impact of Erasmus student mobility on skills enhancement, employability and institutional development as well as on individual competences, personality traits and attitudes. It also looked at the programme's impact on the internationalization of higher education institutions.

2.3 Studies that place attention to cross-border, internationalization and globalisation processes

The international dimension of higher education became one of the central focuses of national governments, international organisations, higher education institutions and universities, student organisations and accreditation agencies (de Wit, 2011). Reflecting on remarks of Knight (2008, 1): "Internationalization is changing the world of higher education, and globalization is changing the world of internationalization", Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley (2009, p. 7) state "Internationalization is defined as the variety of policies and programs that universities and governments implement to respond to globalization." While student mobility represents only a small part of internationalization processes, many higher education institutions are relying mostly on short term exchange programme activities like Erasmus programme.

For higher education institutions student mobility can be seen as an instrument to compete for recognition, prestige and quality enhancement. The Erasmus programme has helped higher education institutions to become more international oriented (Beerkens & Vossensteyn, 2011, p.46). The international dimension is prominent in the Higher education institutions' goals and mission statements, as international networks and cooperation are perceived as highly beneficial (Beerkens & Vossensteyn, 2011, p. 47). Mobility strategy (2012, p. 5) recommendations called to higher education institutions for adopting and implementing own internationalization strategy to promote not only mobility flows but also other forms of internationalization activities.

The compatibility of higher education structures in EHEA makes it easier to students to collaborate in the Erasmus programme, but there are still some limitations. The number of bilateral agreements is that the country/higher education institution has with another country/higher education institution can also determine the student mobility flow (Vogtle and Windzio, 2015). The educational policies shaping the intra-European policy have therefore a great impact in directing student mobility flows.

2.4 Studies focusing on world system theories.

According to world system theory, country's position in the world system determines also the centrality in the student exchange network. This includes international trade links, membership in the international organisations (Shields, 2013) as well as communication factors (web index score, telephone minutes) that coincide with the international mobility flows (Barnett et al., 2016) supporting the central-peripheral network structure.

The literature provides evidence from "non-Western" to the "Western-oriented" flow of international student mobility (eg. US, UK, Australia, France, Germany) (van Mol & Michielsen, 2015), while current political, economic, cultural, geographical, and historical dynamics uncovered evidence on different mobility patterns originating from peripheral countries and targeting other peripheral hubs. Kondakci et al. (2017) pointed out that »student mobility is [only] directed towards Western countries [...] the size and direction of student flow is shaped by intentional policies, and student mobility in every country is guided by an economic rationale«. Their research is focused on the mobility patterns in peripheral countries, identifying emergent regional hubs outside the core. They have identified as emergent regional hubs Italy, Spain, Austria, Czech Republic, Belgium, Denmark, Poland, Hungary, Sweden and Finland in Europe.

Moreover, Macrander (2017) addresses the international student mobility patterns in the regional network. Their research findings suggest that globally and regionally, economically developed countries provide a core from the world system theory perspective and the less-developed states represent the periphery (Macrander, 2017, p. 243). However, with the raising evidence of planned and emergent regional hubs, Kondakci et al. (2017) have identified new secondary core centres attracting mobile students.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While there are many different approaches to study student mobility flows, as there are also diverse rationales for promoting student mobility driven by political, cultural and academic motives. Papatsiba (2006, p. 99) for example states that student mobility in Europe can be seen as a means to promote a single European labour market or/and to develop a joint European consciousness - creating European

citizens. Student mobility can be therefore seen as an instrument for professional and personal development by gaining international competences (learn a foreign language, intercultural experience, autonomy, self-confidence, adventure, critical thinking etc.) useful for economy and society (Papatsiba, 2006, p. 99; Lesjak et al. 2015, p. 846). For higher education institutions, on the other hand, student mobility can be seen as an instrument to compete for recognition, prestige and quality enhancement (Green 2012).

In Europe the establishment of the EHEA aimed at promoting mobility, employability and development in Europe. The Sorbonne and Bologna Declaration laid foundations for progressive convergence of European HE systems, "creating a barrier-free EHEA characterized by compatibility and comparability between the HE systems of the signatory states" (Papatsiba, 2006, p. 95), implying a great emphasis on creating the mobility flows. The Erasmus mobility scheme is one of the most successful programmes aimed to support exchanges, study visits, and networking activities inside and outside of Europe.

The importance of the student mobility in Europe has been consistently increasing with each Bologna Ministerial communique. The 2009 Leuven communique (p. 4) emphasised the benefits of the mobility for personal development, employability, fostering respect for diversity, capacity to deal with other cultures, encouraging linguistic pluralism as well as increasing the cooperation and competition between higher education institutions. The 2012 Bucharest communique (p. 3), has also highlighted the "learning mobility as essential to ensure the quality of higher education, enhance students' employability and expand cross-border collaboration within the EHEA and beyond". Moreover, the new mobility strategy 2020 the "Mobility for Better Learning", accompanying the Bucharest communique (2012), called upon a more balanced mobility flows in the EHEA (especially the degree mobility). The 2015 Bologna implementation report (European Commission, 2015, p. 237) provided evidence that the term "balanced mobility" has not been properly introduced, since the majority of EHEA countries can be regarded as unbalanced, when using the incoming/outgoing ratio. In terms of mobility flows 30 out of 41 countries were regarded as export oriented, only one (Finland) balanced, and 10 import oriented (United Kingdom, Denmark, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Russia, France and Belgium). Further research on this topic can be done, as this aspect still needs more rethinking.

Recent economic crisis (2008) had also a great impact on higher education systems (Skrbinjek et al., 2018), including on mobility flows. With the increasing influence of competitive markets, the student mobility flows can help recognize the most attractive student's destinations for their exchange experience and after graduation a potential labour market. Other research supports the claim that the effects of the mobility exchange programmes on the labour market can be substantial (Gonzalez et al. 2011).

As mobility is fostered by many European instruments, students and scholars should take advantage of it to gain knowledge, experience and methodologies outside of their national country. In addition, focus of research can be shifted more on scholar and researchers mobility to provide evidence of mobility patterns beneficial to several higher education public and private institutions.

However, this research on student mobility can be useful to other scholars who are investigating and researching mobility flows. The identification of main theoretical approaches is useful to gain a quick overview on student mobility flows and internationalization topics as well as to better match their research methodologies with the theoretical framework.

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