

Key Findings

Student mobility: between myth and reality

By Laure Endrizzi

research analyst in the Science and Technology Watch department

Although student mobility is already an old academic tradition, its nature has radically changed over the last 20 years. There has been a move away from mobility that was largely dependant on the geopolitical and cultural relations between countries towards mobility perceived as a lever for economic development by governments and as a competitive advantage by schools. In parallel, the number of people involved has grown significantly from 1.9 million in 2000 to more than 3 million in 2007 (OCDE, 2009; Vincent-Lancrin, 2009).

These changes of perspective and scale have led on the one hand to the deployment of new strategies, both for the countries and for the schools, and on the other hand to the emergence of the figure of the "international student" and new discourses on the individual benefits of student mobility.

1. Mobility and internationalization

1.1 What are we talking about?

Higher education has been undergoing profound upheavals for about fifty years, making new arbitrations necessary to strike a balance between public interests and economic logic. In this moving landscape, academic mobility is trying to find its place (Harfi *et al.*, 2005).

While it is very well known in Europe, Erasmus is far from being representative of student migration. Two criteria are of fundamental importance to grasp the conceptual complexity which characterizes them: the distinction between exchange mobility (Erasmus) and degree mobility on the one hand, and that between organised mobility and spontaneous mobility on the other hand.

UNESCO and OECD define international students as "people studying in a foreign country of which they are not permanent residents". This definition combines three elements: permanent residence, prior education and, incidentally, non-citizenship (ISU, 2009; OCDE, 2009).

In spite of the progressive homogenization of international indicators, the repercussion on the data provided by the countries is far from being effective; a certain amount of bias makes the comparison of national data problematic. In addition to the failure to take into account short periods of mobility, the frequent consideration of foreign students as mobile students leads to an over-estimation of numbers. In the same way, the impossibility of isolating the data proper to spontaneous mobility is all the more prejudicial as this form is largely in the majority (Kelo *et al.*, 2006; BFUG, 2009; Eurydice, 2009).

1.2 The rise of Cross-border Tertiary Education

Student mobility is only one facet of what the OECD calls "Cross-border Tertiary Education". Study programmes are becoming internationalized, via academic partnerships and the use of English as the teaching language, or are moving towards virtual learning environments. Schools delocalize part of their activities, via franchise contracts or opening up delocalized campuses. These new forms of cooperation, marked by import-export logic, are accompanied by a significant increase in

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the private offer (CERI, [2008](#); OCDE, [2009](#); Altbach *et al.*, [2009](#); Vincent-Lancrin, [2009](#)).

In this context, it is becoming increasingly urgent to adopt standards that guarantee a certain quality of service (Hallak *et al.*, [2009](#)). While the international trade agreements negotiated by the WTO provide a possible regulatory framework (CERI, [2005](#)), it is the *Unesco/OECD Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education* ([2005](#)) which provide the most solid foundations for developing a Quality assurance culture (CERI, [2008](#); BFUG, [2009](#); ENQA, [2010](#)).

2. Student migrations: a landscape marked by polarities

With numbers that have been multiplied by more than 3 in 30 years, student mobility actually concerns only 2% of the world student population: a stable proportion, in keeping with the overall increase in the number of students. This is first of all a north-south phenomenon: The United States (20%), the United Kingdom (12%), Germany (9%) and France (8%) together attract half of the student mobility in the world.

The polarities in terms of regions of origin are also strong. 50% leave from Asia, 25% from Europe and 10% from Africa. Europe is the only region in the world to be attractive both for Europeans and the other regions. Linguistic, geographical or historical proximity are the factors which generate concentrations of flow: German students are concentrated in Austria, French students in Belgium, Canadian students in the United States, Portuguese students and Moroccans in France (ISU, [2009](#)).

Mobility for doctorates is large, with 7% of students registered at this level of study. But it is lower in higher level courses leading to professional qualifications. In 2007 almost 1 student mobility out of 4 was enrolled in a commercial or administrative course. Sciences are the 2nd most popular field, attracting on average 15% of students.

Since the early 2000s, four major trends are to be observed:

- a rapid growth in numbers coming from Asia, bound for North America, Western Europe and Australia;
- a significant rise in intra-regional mobility, with students who tend more and more to remain within their region of origin;
- the emergence of new destinations (Australia, New Zealand) which are competing with the “big four” and giving rise to a greater dispersion of students;
- the emergence of attractive zones, English-speaking countries being by and large attractive for science courses, and more popular non-English-speaking countries for social sciences or literature and the arts (Altbach *et al.*, [2009](#); ISU, [2009](#); OCDE, [2009](#); Vincent-Lancrin, [2009](#)).

OBHE experts identify 3 main lines of development: procedures related to immigration and visas; students' experience, their expectations and motivations; the costs associated with mobility and going to live in a foreign country (Verbik *et al.*, [2007](#)). OECD experts put forward 3 scenarios, based on the sustained diversified internationalisation, or on a convergence towards a common liberal model or on the triumph of the (former) emerging economies (Vincent-Lancrin, [2009](#)).

3. A cross-perspective on mobility policies in Europe

3.1 The Bologna Process and contributions of the EU-27

Europe occupies a singular position in that it represents the most advanced regional area in terms of the formalization of intra-regional mobility. This European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is gradually being built up, at the initiative of the EU-27 and the lines of action of the [Bologna Process](#). By 2020, the 46 countries that signed are encouraged to achieve the goal of 20% of graduates benefiting from a study period or training abroad (*Leuven Communiqué*, [2009](#)).

In spite of this mobilization, the projections of the countries who signed are very uneven, from one country to another, from one measure to another, and efface neither national cultures nor educational establishment cultures. The move towards an inclusive and dynamic EHEA generates many tensions and the impact of the measures deployed on student mobility remains difficult to assess (BFUG, [2009](#); Crosier *et al.*, [2007](#); Eurydice, [2009](#)).

3.2 Migratory trends in the Bologna area

Migratory trends in Europe are in keeping with those observed at international level: reduced student mobility and an accelerated increase in numbers since 1999. Western Europe is a major destination both for students originating in this area (nearly 4 students out of 5), and also for those of other areas (1 student out of 2 on a worldwide scale) (European Commission, [2009](#)).

3.3 The case of the Erasmus programme

More than 2 million students have taken part in the Erasmus programme since it was launched in 1987. Barely 1% of undergraduate students benefit from it, for an average stay of 6 to 7 months (Eurostudent, [2009](#)). The favourite destination is Spain, which accommodates 18% of Erasmus students; 14% come to France, 11% to Germany. Commercial studies and modern languages are those that dominate Erasmus mobility (European Commission, [2009](#)).

4. From the mobility project to students' experience

4.1 Projects with many motivations

There are many mobility projects, and they vary according to the social, cultural, economic and geographical origins of the candidates (Ennafaa *et al.*, [2008a](#); Terrier, [2009](#); Lindberg, [2009](#)). Broadly speaking, 2 project categories can be distinguished: training and/or research, and discovering cultures (Ennafaa *et al.*, [2008a](#)). The decision to go for mobility in the case of Erasmus is driven by an attraction for language learning and the implementation of distinctive and promotional strategies (Ballatore *et al.*, [2008](#)). According to the Bologna experts, these projects, whatever they may be, run up against many difficulties: economic, social, psychological and also academic (BFUG, [2009](#)).

4.2 An individual decision motivated by a certain rationality

The costs of mobility, extremely variable from one country to another, have a double impact: they seriously curb mobility and they induce a certain amount of rationality in the decisions taken (Varghese, [2008](#); Verbik *et al.*, [2007](#)). Two trends are to be observed as regards tuition fees in Europe: free studies are being progressively withdrawn and different rights for students from outside Europe put into place (OECD, [2009](#)). Most countries have a mobility assistance system, ensuring portability of grants and loans allocated and/or providing special assistance. But the conditions in which these measures are granted are often extremely varied, and are likely to restrict mobility rather than stimulate it (Eurydice, [2009](#)). People's freedom of movement between the countries of Europe obviously impacts the migratory flow. But certain administrative obstacles remain, related to obtaining a visa and a work permit and also to access to housing (BFUG, [2009](#)). Immigration policies which encourage international students to live in a country on a temporary or permanent basis influence the attractiveness of those countries (Verbik *et al.*, [2007](#); OCDE, [2009](#)).

4.3 What are the profiles of Erasmus mobility students?

Erasmus students generally come from a comfortable background. The average amount of financial aid provided by the family is significant, at least equivalent to the amount of the Erasmus grant allocated (Soulo Otero *et al.*, [2006](#)). In spite of the inadequacy of Erasmus grants, students consider their financial position to be globally satisfactory. The fact of not knowing how to measure the financial risk incurred is a major hurdle for non-mobile students (Eurostudent, [2009](#)).

Erasmus students want to make their linguistic capital bear fruit. Many of them follow language classes during their stay, although these courses, which are optional and even fee-paying, are not always recognized by the school that they come from (Soulo Otero *et al.*, [2006](#); Krupnik *et al.*, [2007](#); Carapinha, [2009](#)). Many of them also want an integrated language course, in order to better familiarize themselves with study practices in the host country (Soulo Otero *et al.*, [2006](#); Goes *et al.*, [2007](#)). They still have a migratory past (family, school, etc) and build up a "mobility capital" as their experience grows (Murphy-Lejeune, [2003](#); Ballatore *et al.*, [2008](#); Schomburg *et al.*, [2008](#); Wiers-Jenssen, [2009](#)). Would it therefore be enough to multiply experiences to stimulate the desire for mobility (Bertoncini, [2008](#); *Commission européenne*, [2009](#))? In any case, just becoming immersed in the host country does not make it possible to understand other cultures any better (Abdallah-Pretceille in Dervin *et al.*, [2008](#); Dervin, [2008a](#); Papatsiba, [2003](#)). Is it then a question of "learning how to be a foreigner" with the help of special training (Anquetil, [2006](#); Dervin, [2008b](#))?

4.4 Living conditions and experience of mobility

In spite of increasing awareness on the part of the authorities and new assistance initiatives (Verbik *et al.*, 2007; CampusFrance, 2010), hosting services are regarded as insufficient (Crosier *et al.*, 2007). While the “initiator” experience is globally considered as a positive one (Soulo Otero *et al.*, 2006; Krupnik *et al.*, 2007; Boomans *et al.*, 2008), sociability remains a difficult issue. In France, universities are regarded as not very socializing (Ennafaa *et al.*, 2008a) and people tend to keep to themselves rather than subscribe to the university culture (Agulhon *et al.*, 2009). Generally, meeting with local students does not happen, even when the language of communication is mastered. Sociability is sometimes intense, often on the surface, and tends to be developed within the peer group (other foreign students), or even within the national group (Papatsiba, 2003; Tsoukalas in Byram *et al.*, 2008; Dervin, 2008a; Brown, 2009). In parallel, the linguistic motivation is coming under attack from the use of English as a *lingua franca* in non-English-speaking countries (Caudery *et al.* in Byram *et al.*, 2008; Dervin, 2009).

5. Does student mobility open up perspectives?

5.1 Does mobility increase educational capital?

Mobile students show extra commitment in their studies (Bracht *et al.*, 2006; Schomburg *et al.*, 2008) and the prestigious dimension of the schools, conveyed by international rankings, influences the choice of the host country (ACA, 2006; Bourdin, 2008). Individual initiatives are nevertheless greatly weakened by the alliance strategies between establishments, which, even in the case of Erasmus, reproduce the order of the inequalities of prestige. The lack of transparency in recruiting procedures accentuates this embrittlement of students’ promotional strategies (Ballatore *et al.*, 2008).

In the Bologna Europe, only certain regulated professions benefit from the recognition of qualifications. The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) does not yet make it possible to begin a diploma in one country and to finish it in another, but it does not always make it possible to validate a study period abroad either. In spite of certain recent initiatives (the Tuning and AHELO projects), the ECTS credits are defined and are used in a very disparate way (Crosier *et al.*, 2007; Eurydice, 2009; Carapinha, 2009; BFUG, 2009). More than a third of students have their courses recognized only partially or even not at all, because of a failing in negotiation between the parties or reticence on the part of the original school (Fiedrich *et al.*, 2009).

5.2 Does mobility increase employability?

Mobility experiences do not encourage access to better paid or more senior employment positions, but lead to professional activities which call more on “international competencies” (Bracht *et al.*, 2006; Wiers-Jenssen, 2009). Generally, even if any direct causality is to be excluded, student mobility goes hand in hand with later mobility, professional or otherwise, international or otherwise (Parey *et al.*, 2008; Schomburg *et al.*, 2008).

This “brain mobility” cannot be unilaterally related to a “brain drain”. While certain profiles of students who have qualified abroad do not return to their country of origin, the links between the internationalization of education, student mobility and qualified migration is infinitely more complex than may be believed from a simple counting of these international students (Ennafaa *et al.*, 2008b; CERI, 2008; Vincent-Lancrin, 2008).

While recruitment procedures in France support selected immigration, which leads to inequalities (Erlach in Mazzella, 2009; Terrier, 2009), foreign students seldom have anything in common with a migratory elite: their situation is indeed the fruit of a combination of structural factors and complex individual situations which make their plans for the future particularly uncertain (Ennafaa *et al.*, 2008b).

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