Student mobility and the enlargement and consolidation of the European Union

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1. Introduction

The latest enlargement of the European Union has resulted in a Union that is more diverse than ever before. The Rome Declaration prepared by the participants of the UNICA Student conference in September 2010 states that "Only by acknowledging the existing differences in member states can the consolidation process of the Union be realised"*)*. It is worth having a closer look at the important role that student mobility can have in the enlargement and consolidation process of the European Union. Student mobility is nowadays a European institution and can be a powerful tool in the formation of a European identity.

Within the scope of this paper we will answer the following research questions:

- How does student mobility foster enlargement and consolidation of the European Union?
- How can student mobility be improved to function better?

The main input for this paper is the outcome of the UNICA student conference in Rome (September 2010). On the basis of those outcomes we will argue that there is a social value of student mobility that is higher than the individuals' gain. We will focus on different stakeholders such as student, universities, EU member states and the European Union. Pointing out the social value of student mobility provides a link to the question of how student mobility positively affects the enlargement and consolidation the EU. Therefore we will focus on the economic and cultural aspects and argue that they are positive externalities of student mobility, which should consequently be funded to a certain extent.

We will argue further that given their current status, universities are responsible for making mobility function. We will argue in detail how universities should take responsibility given their incentives and interests. We conclude that there are several specific inefficiencies in the way universities implement policy enforced student mobility. We point out specific recommendations to universities and argue that there is a high potential to make student mobility more efficient.

2. Cost-benefit analysis of student mobility in the enlarged European Union

The enlargement of the European Union with 12 new member countries in the 21st century has created a more diversified Union. This diversification has taken place at several levels, two of which are especially crucial for student mobility: the economic diversification and the cultural diversification. This chapter will discuss the challenges the economic diversification of the enlarged European Union poses for student mobility.

Before entering the economic aspects though, a distinction will be made between different kinds of student mobility. This article relies on the division of student mobility into two: horizontal and vertical mobility. The first one refers to short-term mobility, such an exchange period abroad while the second one refers to long-term mobility, such as doing an entire degree abroad (ESIB 2007, 5–6). This chapter will concentrate mostly on the economic dilemmas related to vertical mobility since they have often been overlooked, even though with the creation of Bachelor's and Master's degrees through the Bologna Process, the majority of European countries have advocated especially increased vertical mobility. Another reason for the urgency of problems related to vertical mobility is the enlargement of the European Union and the diversification of its member states. Horizontal mobility will be discussed later on in the article in relation to the group work at the UNICA student conference.

A traditional way of exploring the economic aspects a certain phenomenon is the cost-benefit analysis of the issue in question. This chapter will follow the cots-benefit analysis of student mobility made by de Villé, Martou and Vandenberghe (1996). Education at all levels can be seen as providing both individual gains and collective gains and can hence be defined as a semi-public good. In the European Union the collective gains have been emphasised and education has been mostly funded by public investments. (de Villé et al. 1996, 205–206.) The growing student mobility and the internationalisation of higher education has, however, raised questions concerning funding that ties education to a certain country. The following cost-benefit analysis will show that student mobility can have positive gains for all the actors involved: the mobile students, sending countries, host countries and the European Union as a whole.

The gains of student mobility for the mobile individuals include acquiring new competences and qualifications, increasing their employability, and enriching their ways of thinking through the exposure to a different culture. Mobile students bring prestige to the higher education institutions in the host countries, contribute to the development of their respective study programs, add to the circulation of information, and help the economy by spending money on living costs. The sending countries get in return more qualified and internationally trained individuals with particular skills and knowledge capital related to trade relations. As for the European Union as a whole, mobile

students contribute to the human capital of the Union and to its competitive advantage. (de Villé et al., 1996, 209–212.)

Even though the overall costs of student mobility are lower than its benefits, they need to be taken into account. At the individual level, costs of mobility are related to moving, language training and so forth. Even if within the European Union, students from other EU countries cannot be charged higher fees from those charged to the local students, there are still economic issues related to the subsidies of education and social security, to mention a few. The additional costs of hosting foreign students as compared to national students are very low unless the amount of foreign students, combined with the amount of local students attains the capacity limits of a particular institution. The costs of mobility for the sending countries are related to brain drain. If the mobile students do not return to their country of origin, the sending country loses its investments made in the earlier stages of education. (de Villé et al., 1996, 210–211.)

The working group at UNICA conference underlined two of these costs: the costs of mobility for the individual and the costs of mobility for the sending countries. Both of these costs were brought up especially by the Eastern European delegates, who also saw brain drain as an urgent issue. Brain mobility is, in particular, a phenomenon of the knowledge-based societies. Human capital has become the greatest strength of a country, which has led to the competition on the "best brains". Brain mobility is problematic because it is unequally divided between nations: the countries that already have an economic advantage attract the most highly skilled individuals, which deepens the economic differences between countries (Robertson 2006, 1.) Brain mobility and the creation of unequal areas of brain gain and brain drain within the European Union has become the biggest cost of student mobility since the enlargement of the Union. Brain mobility is seen as a key challenge in the economic analysis of student mobility within the enlarged European Union. In order to be able to address the issue of brain mobility, data is needed on the current flows of student population. At the moment there are however important limitations to the reliability of the available data on vertical mobility (see Kelo, Teichler & Wächter 2006).

3. Student mobility as a tool for the consolidation of the European Union

The European Union is strongly considering mobility as an effective tool for people to get in contact with each other in order to build a common identity. In particular, lots of interest and funds are directed towards highly skilled migrants[1] and the construction of a tight connection with Eastern

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[1] During the last decade there is a tendency in literature to substitute this term with "Mobility", referred to movement of people within EU or just around its borders. This tricky label says a lot about the change of representation which is aimed. The word "migrant", indeed, especially the highly-skilled-type, evokes Industrial Revolution, poverty, lack of possibilities. Mobility recalls awareness. http://www.mobility-migration.net/index.aspx

European Countries. The most important action taken so far is the well-known Life Long Learning Programme (LLP), whereas Erasmus Mundus and other programmes such as Tempus and Basileus are made for communication between old member states, new members and candidate or potential candidate countries. Hence, it can be observed that mobility programmes are created in order to provide the possibility to share knowledge, systems, methodologies and good practices among member states, but also to shorten distances between different cultures. Erasmus Programme, the most important of the mobility programmes, or at least the most famous one, involves 31 countries. For instance, Turkey participates for all intent and purposes, whereas the Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Croatia under the preparatory measure phase[2].

Problems and solutions walk together in this issue. European Union has to challenge so many different aspects of a complex society; a general recognisable EU approach is *action lead by values*, which are in this case sharing of knowledge, peace, opportunities, tolerance and identity. Nevertheless, on the same table there is the problem of recognition of credits and diplomas, unequal opportunities, access to fund for extended portions of population, and language barriers. On one hand, there is the ideal of sharing a common space, but, on the other hand, the threat (real or perceived) of losing a country's tradition and culture, which is also one of the criticisms of the Bologna Process[3]. This is one of the hypotheses Jiménez et al. (2004) presented in a remarkable work on European identity. Common cultural identity is very hard to build because of countries' different backgrounds, the end of the so-called Nation State, and because of the fact, of course, that the urgency of the situation might not allow for this building of an identity to take the time it needs.

What does this cultural conflict mean? Every country has to compromise with the others if they want to take part in the privileges and open mobility. Again, culture configures itself as a barrier and as a solution, too. The analysis can be carried out in relation to horizontal or vertical mobility. In the first case, in order to get the credits recognised by the home university, an agreement between institutions is needed. Nevertheless, if a student has to attend classes and courses that must be recognised by the sending faculty or, as in most cases, choose exams which are supposed to be as similar as possible to home university's curriculum, he or she will have to pick very similar exams to those back home. This is a paradox that can be avoided by enhancing flexibility in the curricula during the exchanges. In this way, the student will have more freedom of choice and more possibility to deepen his or her knowledge of the host country. It seems quite easy at an individual level. It is important, though, to bear in mind that institutions are those who give the most relevant contribution in order to build a representation or an attitude towards mobility, in a circular process with the person and the society. Every state in the European Union should be

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[2] http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc1208_en.htm
[3] For further informatiom see http://bolognaburns.org/en

able to trust that other member countries can successfully train, test and teach exchange students, even if they do it differently from how things are done back in the sending country.

Debate on mobility leads necessarily to a debate on language issues. While one's choice of a study destination is affected by several aspects, language barriers represent a limit which does not permit students to choose freely. Many universities have websites that are only partially or not at all translated into English, only few courses and classes are taught in English, and there is a lack of interest to foster language skills at the university level. A network is certainly fundamental in order to encourage the learning of other languages starting from the primary school level, non-formal education contexts, and leisure places such as cinemas and theatres. According to the forum discussion at the UNICA student conference, it would be fruitful to teach more than one language at school, besides English and native language(s). This would disclose a country's attitude toward multi-linguism. A specific population or geographical area might be more willing to learn languages, while others might not see anything but negative aspects. We could expect that young people will be more open to a multicultural society, but this is not necessarily true.

According to several studies on student mobility and the eventual promotion of a European identity (e.g. Sigalas, 2009, King and Ruiz, 2003, Giannuzzi *in press*), openness and willingness to take part in a larger community make the individual an *identity provider*. This is, however, differently measured depending on the country of origin, the chosen destination, the language barriers, and the perceived similarity with country of destination, and so on. We still do not have structured data in this field in order to answer to the question because the complexity of the phenomenon allows scholars to analyse different variables.

The above mentioned analysis and measures are the basis for people to be prepared to communicate with the "Other", which could be a former enemy during last World War or a boundary neighbour. One of the most illuminating keywords is training: training to mobility, to flexibility, to new languages, to tolerance. This does not mean getting into the melting pot and forgetting about one's origin and tradition in order to create only one nation. In the opposite, European Union's slogan says "Unity in diversity". It is the aim which can be cultivated by teaching European history at a primary school level together with the aforesaid suggestions. It means awareness of who we are, what we do and what we aim for. If the European Union is able to tackle these difficulties, it will really attract and produce excellence in higher education, which means no more brain drain, but mobility in a broad sense.

4. The responsibilities of universities with regard to student mobility

In the previous sections it has been argued that student mobility affects the consolidation and integration of the European Union via economic and (inter-)cultural channels. Student mobility is a

semi-public good with positive externalities and should thus be funded to a certain extent by the public. In a narrow sense, the European Union and the member states have to fund mobility as they represent *the public* that is affected.

Since the issue of higher education affects various policy levels (EU, national states and federal states), responsibilities are as well diffused among them. In general, nation-states, and not the EU, are concerned with higher education issues and the implementation of the Bologna Process. Student mobility is coordinated on an intra-community level of the European Union and the European Higher Education Area, in a first place with the Life Long Learning Mobility Programme. Technically this institution is providing funding for student mobility and hence internalises the positive external effects of student mobility.

However, there are several non-financial aspects which can, if ignored, make existing mobility funding inefficient. Thus the focus of this section will neither be on financial aspects of student mobility funding nor on the lump-sum funding of mobility. It will focus on existing non-financial barriers for student mobility. Implementing an efficient way or *making mobility work* is an equally important part for the internalisation of positive external effects. The main outcome of the UNICA student conference in Rome was that *improving several non-financial issues is a powerful tool with large potential.*

Why are universities responsible?

At the moment student mobility is characterised by several non-financial barriers at the university level. The institution of university is closely related to student mobility and its operative dimension. Due to their practical experience universities have accumulated a profound knowledge stock regarding the costs and benefits as well as the implementation of policy-forced mobility such as Erasmus. On the one hand universities are the institutions with the most detailed information about student mobility, but on the other hand it should be taken into account that they as well have specific interests which might differ from the public interests. However, universities have responsibilities in the consolidation and integration process of the European Union because of their role in the society in general. Universities are very much related to and dependent on nation-states but they are also very closely connected with each other. Universities have high incentives to cooperate in an international level because of academic exchange and scientific development. This idea of integration is older than the integration of nation-states and has its roots in the Middle-Ages.

How can universities make mobility function?

There are major obstacles for student mobility at the university level. Universities have not yet taken full responsibility in the consolidation and integration process of the EU but should do so by

making mobility function. Several non-financial barriers affect the individuals' choice to travel abroad or not. The major issues are financial support at university level, lack of information and transparency, language barriers, and problems with recognition of studies undertaken abroad. The main outcomes of the UNICA conference in Rome are some very practical suggestions which we discuss in detail here. The proposals of the conference are linked to the responsibility of the universities. Some of them might also affect policy making, however, we see that the universities' role in the society includes contribution to the policy making process.

Financial barriers such as different income levels between the hosting and sending countries or different social security systems are very common obstacles for student mobility. The responsibility of the university is to inform about funding and grant possibilities, and reallocate resources in order to provide the students with access to research funds and other grants. The research activities of the students should be facilitated by providing funds and opportunities to carry out research abroad. This would provide an additional funding source. Next to this, international collaborations should be increased to enhance the student input in research, academic and humanitarian projects.

Students considering a study period abroad are confronted with a *lack of information and little transparency*. This applies also to policy makers interested in analyzing the effectiveness of mobility programs. The data collection on student mobility has to be improved since existing data does not represent accurately the general trends and gives a false picture of mobility flows. As we argued before, universities have accumulated a profound knowledge stock on student mobility. In order to share the knowledge the universities possess, an adequate framework should be created and could take the form of a European Mobility portal: a network of websites with information organised by countries, universities, faculties, grants, and programmess, which could be accessible for students from all European countries. Although an inter-community institution would be needed for its coordination, the main share has to come from the universities, namely providing adequate and updated data and information. In addition, all academic websites should be translated in English to add to transparency.

Another major obstacle are *language barriers,* especially the limited possibilities to select courses abroad because of the teaching language. Therefore, every faculty should offer a minimum amount of classes in English, as English has the status of a common language. In the long-term, universities should enforce the language skills of their students and work together on the improvement and implementation of a common European language curriculum. The introduction of a standardised European language test with the same grading system and requirements would be a necessary condition for this.

Recognition is another major impediment which could be made more efficient without any financial input. Problems with the recognition of studies taken abroad occur because of quality differences between universities and the diversity of study programmes. These obstacles can be overcome by informing students of what is expected when they return from the studies abroad. Universities can compose lists of subjects which will be recognised in each university. Another aspect of recognition is the problems with grading. Therefore, the creation and implementation of a common European mark scale is necessary. The quality difference in Higher Education can be overcome with the introduction of a qualification system for subjects to be comparable in order to achieve similar levels of skills and competence. Flexibility in the curricula should be enhanced in general. Mobility can be enforced by giving mobile students the possibility to take courses unrelated to their field of study and yet ensuring their recognition at the home university.

In general, the universities' responsibility is to support the students. Therefore specific training should be provided in order to create a team of "*Mobility tutors*" in each faculty. Furthermore a position of "Mobility assistant" or a peer tutor, who provides help to foreign students at the host universities, should be created.

5. Conclusion

Enhancing student mobility within the European Union necessitates considering several aspects: allocation of resources; use of non-financial benefits, for instance in the case of Mobility tutors or implementation of university websites; quality measures for the recognition of credits; and fostering of transparency with regard to the information on mobility programmes. It is possible and necessary to improve student mobility with the already existing resources, especially if we want mobility to become a powerful tool capable of promoting the consolidation of the enlarged European Union. Sharing of good practice, and more generally, sharing of the differences among the countries, together with a structured work on both vertical and horizontal mobility, represent the fundamental steps to be taken in order to improve awareness of the current situation. Only with a more versatile perspective on each country's attitudes towards mobility and their way of interacting with the European Union, will we be able to consider more pragmatic solutions to brain mobility, and language and financial issues. Universities can have an essential role in this process, as stated previously. Universities can overcome the issues related to nation states, which would allow for increased freedom in a truly knowledge based society.

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