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Academic Mobility in Higher Education

Authors:

Koti, Sharada, Ms, Global Student Forum WHEC WG

Ié, Ericson Ocante, Mr, Global Student Forum WHEC WG

Sijariya, Falit, Mr, Global Student Forum WHEC WG

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Abstract

Internationalisation can be a tool for achieving higher quality education, personal development and intercultural competences of students, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence of people, as well as national and global sustainable development. It is important to keep in mind that internationalisation is a tool for increased added value of education, not an end in itself. It should contribute to the self-determined process of strengthening the cultural and social diversity to establish cohesion as well as respectful and peaceful coexistence and collaboration, and to contribute to global sustainable development. The demand for free education is bringing the direct need for education to open up and reflect on how knowledge is gathered, to widen and reflect the western-centric knowledge production through internationalisation.In order to assure the international character of studies for everyone, as well as the general quality of teaching, learning and research, HEIs should pay thorough attention to creating an international environment at their institution; and governments must offer measures and funding to help HEIs to achieve this. Every student should have the chance to benefit from a diverse, cross-continental and cross-cultural internationalisation.

Content

Acronyms

AUF: Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie

ISM: International Student Mobility

RPL: Recognition of the Prior Learning

Introduction

Teaching and studying abroad are critical components in reducing the academic community's regional isolation. International exchange programmes are especially important for personal and professional development, as well as for the socioeconomic area. **Every student should have the opportunity to gain valuable new experience, learn foreign languages, and develop interpersonal skills in culturally diverse environments through mobility**. The pace of globalisation has increased significantly since the 1980s (Johnson et al., 2006) and it has brought about not only interdependence of national states, but also multiculturalism. The effects of it are no new phenomenon to educational institutions. Implementation of education policies regarding academic mobility in higher education has changed the global education spectrum in manifolds.

Academic Mobility, which is defined as the mobility of "individuals who expressly cross borders intending to study" (OECD, 2006), is of significant importance: it should be increased and further developed, leading to a more global outlook in the research. In this policy brief, Academic mobility will be used as a generic term referring to students and to educational and research personnel. **A mobile student or educator could be defined as an individual who participates in an organised exchange for a specific amount of time, usually as part of an exchange programme for learning or teaching purposes, regardless of whether it is as part of an exchange programme or not. Intercultural competence and understanding, as well as democratic values and skills and language competences, are needed in the globalised world as keys for development of a society where everyone can live together peacefully**.

The global pattern of student mobility is fairly well documented by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) annual compilation of national enrolment data, which covers nearly all countries worldwide. However, there is a scarcity of data on faculty mobility. Figures on participation in short-term ERASMUS teaching assignments abroad provide the only internationally comparable statistical reference. More information is available from national surveys, which are conducted on a regular basis in countries such as the United States and Germany. They are, however, not cross-nationally comparable and primarily address the mobility of scholars for research purposes.

UNESCO statistics show that almost 30% of students spending more than 1 year abroad came from East Asia and the Pacific. The major individual sending country is China (sending 14% of worldwide mobile students), followed by India (5%), the Republic of Korea (4%), Japan (2.5%), and Germany (2%). There is also **asymmetry** in terms of numbers and sources of internationally mobile students: a total of 5.3 Million students were studying outside their country of origin but a staggering 3.7 Million of them were from Non-OECD countries. This clearly implies **power imbalance and disproportionate growth, that have as a policy outcome the need of broader funding tools**. Each country provides a unique experience which plays a major role in shaping the global research narrative: for this same reason, offshore satellite campuses or branches of top global universities in the global South can further implement internationalisation, as long as they do not become the tool to block the growth of autonomous experiences of gradual setting up of universities *in loco*. Transnational education should not be used for branding higher education institutions or seeking profit from such arrangements. Instead, **transnational education should benefit the local community and the learning environment by providing students with opportunities for quality assured education and mobility, free of charge**.

1. Academic Mobility in Higher Education for Students

Students pursuing a degree abroad typically anticipate that their foreign degree will provide opportunities to obtain a good job in their home country or abroad. Language, admission practices, study costs, reputation of a higher education system or specific subjects, and general living conditions abroad, including attitudes toward foreign students, are all considered when choosing a host country. Many mobile students prefer to study in cultural contexts with which they are familiar, as evidenced by large student flows between countries with identical or similar languages or neighbouring countries (see, e.g., Lanzendorf, 2006b).

Global participation in student mobility has more than tripled since 1975, when internationally comparable data became available: this is the sharpest increase in foreign student numbers in history occurred at the turn of the century. When figures from 1999 are compared to those from 2004, a 41 percent increase can be seen (UNESCO, 2006: 34). However, the rates of increase in student mobility have always been roughly in line with the overall increase in higher education participation. Only recently has the proportion of transnational mobile students in the total number of tertiary education students increased slightly. An Australian study (Bo hm et al., 2002) presents scenarios for the future growth of global demand for international higher education. According to the study, **the demand for international education has at least doubled between 2000 and 2015, and will more than double again by 2025, reaching more than 7 million students**.

Most mobile students face numerous challenges in their personal and academic lives. According to surveys, students face barriers such as **family barriers, financial barriers, psychological barriers, and social barriers**. Psychological barriers include feelings of homesickness or fear of a new environment, whereas social barriers typically involve friends and family. Concerning the **social dimension of mobility in higher education**, it has become a mainstream issue of discussion and advocacy among many student unions. On that, HE Institutions have to be aware that international mobility is more than changing the language and the main place of the learning program: it is also making sure that international students have equal opportunities to take part in the learning community starting from housing rights, involvement in the main participatory bodies, membership of study associations, participation in cultural offer, planning of specific health support programs in case of disadvantaged economic backgrounds, and of dedicated psychological support programs to struggle against the potential loneliness, promoting mental well-being.

Student support systems are the means through which fair access and possible success within higher education are ensured. The term covers a variety of support mechanisms that vary from grants, scholarships, and other monetary allowances received by mobility learners enrolled in higher education, to concrete material necessities such as housing, public transport, and infrastructure (libraries, university premises). Support systems also include services such as counselling, catering, and everything that is provided to students to help them sustain their basic needs, without which studying is not possible.

The reflection of the diversity of the society in the student body is a fundamental indicator of the fairness, equitability, and democratic accessibility of any higher education system. Furthermore, credit mobile students face a common problem when engaging in academic activities due to a lack of knowledge of academic prerequisites and qualifications in various countries, differences in the structure of the academic term, and disparities in the times at which examinations are taken. **Recognition of qualifications, degrees and prior learning plays an essential role in one's academic journey as it is the first and most important step when**

talking about the accessibility to continuing higher education through academic mobility. It has become more evident how important **RPL**, either formal or informal, can be for enhancing access and equitable participation of non-traditional learners in higher education mobility. RPL connects closely with lifelong learning and flexible pathways, also helping people with migrant and refugee backgrounds without official documentation of their educational background.

A lack of foreign language skills is considered as another big barrier to most of the mobile students, not only the credit mobile students. Extending mobility beyond a country's borders is becoming increasingly important as the country seeks **to develop a globally connected citizenship, even before a young highly-skilled and low-cost labour force**.

The academic exchanges invite people to act in a global manner, increasing the opportunities for growing and developing the capacity to commercialise knowledge (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016). We should see the Academic Mobility in Higher Education from a global perspective and for that, including the maximum number of institutions and structures to strengthen internationalisation efforts. This commitment should be closely linked to the fight against all forms of discrimination of people, independently of religion, gender, color, sex or philosophy. Academic Mobility in Higher Education holds strong potential to positively contribute to this endeavour: **encouraging questions about yourself to deepen your same awareness of the world, coming back with a baggage consisting not only of professional skills but also of a matured knowledge of the world**.

Five critical challenges identified are illustrated here below (López-Duarte, et al 2021): these priorities should be primarily addressed to move a step ahead in revolutionising a sustainable and fair academic mobility in higher education.
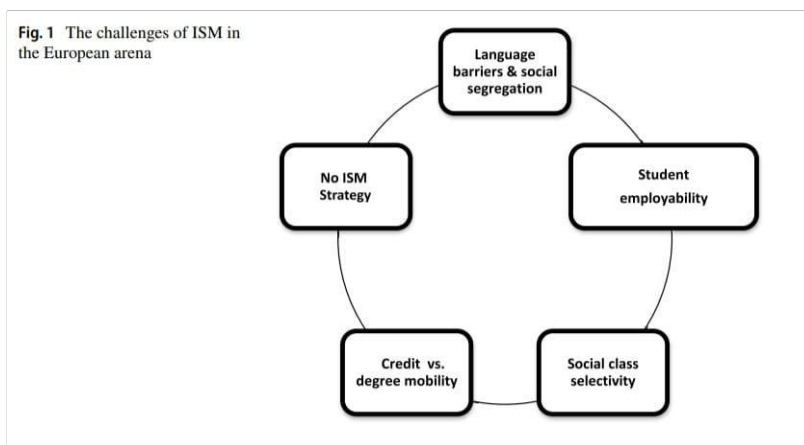

Fig. 01

2. Academic Mobility in Higher Education for Teachers and Researchers

Obtaining host laboratories to carry out thesis or post-doctoral studies is important in the career of (future) researchers. The more we observe the research scenario on an international level, we discover the facts that the acceptance by a host laboratory requires many conditions that the applicant will have to fulfil. In particular financial guarantees although the majority of researchers are students at the beginning of their scientific career or are affiliated to universities with low budgets. **Getting visas for research and teaching reasons should be an inclusive process**. Therefore, age limits for fee waivers for visas should be raised, application

forms should be gender-sensitive, offices for handling visa-applications should be designed in an accessible way, and procedures should be in place to make it easy to apply for visas no matter where you are located.

The marketing of research programmes and PhD or post-PhD opportunities must be factual and accessible, and must not be profit-seeking. **Rather than prioritising the marketing or recruiting processes, priority should be given to improving the conditions for applicants and the quality and availability of information on research programmes and opportunities**. Higher education institutions, career centres and/or employment offices should assist international teachers and researchers with offering career counselling and provide information on employment opportunities, legal rights and duties.

However, efforts are being made to promote intra-continental mobility. In the global context, **collaboration between universities has not yet been fully developed**, despite the assistance of agencies such as the AUF in the Francophone space. There are efforts that need to be made at this level to enable countries to make up for their lack of training and experience sharing to participate in the integral development of humanity.

It is increasingly clear that the first barrier remains the funding of higher education, but if efforts could be made to bring states and laboratories together, to sign solid partnerships with clear terms of reference, this situation can improve. When we look at the scientific publications of researchers from the Global South, more specifically in the African context, we see less collaboration and an inadequacy in the quality of the work carried out. **Mobility should be a right and not a privilege because it is subordinated to the quality of scientific production of results and is intrinsically linked to the need to have quality higher education**. Access to research and a global setting up of open educational resources should be an inclusive vector to convey international mobility of teachers and researchers. **Resources from all over the world are essential for the quality of research outcomes, as well as for giving students and researchers a global perspective on their field**. Therefore, universities and decision-makers should stand for making all research and educational resources open and freely available, for example by publishing in open-access journals: research and educational resources should also be open, freely available, and understandable to groups outside of academia. Internationally conducted research should be included in the curricula and teaching to enhance the researching experience in case of mobility programmes. Unfortunately, the world is facing the same challenges, which requires a pooling of forces, in order to have global solutions to challenges such as climate change as well as peace and security.

3. Key Challenges in International Academic Mobility for Higher Education

International mobility of students and academics represent one of the paths "institutions and nations' drive to internationalise" (Knight, 2004, p. 5): it is the mark of globalisation in the educational field (Yergebekov & Temirbekova, 2012; Teichler, 2015). **Recent research emphasises that important parts of the globe are still to achieve comparable quality in this area and "cross-border and transnational higher education" represents an opportunity to facilitate progress in science and education** (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009; Kosmützky & Putty, 2016, p. 23). The Bologna Process, in this sense, has been an important reform because of the many changes it has made to the previous systems of higher education in Europe and extending to other parts of the world. The Bologna Declaration, signed in June 1999 and based on the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998, aimed to harmonise qualification systems of higher education and increase the mobility of staff and students within the European countries ("The Bologna Declaration", 1999). However, ISM still reaches only a minority of higher education

pursuing students despite the goals of the Bologna processes to make ISM available across all social classes (EHEA, 2009). This is the case even in exchange and credit mobility programs, and social inequality in Erasmus policy debate appears to be an issue that frequently gets overlooked. The root of inequality in ISM often stems from inadequate funding (Choudaha, 2017), as grants and sponsorship do not nearly meet the needs of many students (Findlay, 2011), despite some success in reducing funding barriers (Cairns, 2019), social selectivity continues to obstruct ISM (Teichler, 2012). The main impediments are attitudes inherited from one's preceding education system and a lack of information of all the benefits they can acquire from mobility. **Inadequate adaptation of curricula, teaching and learning methods, and research in relation to the global level, as well as inappropriate harmonisation of policy regulation and lack of public funding, are the reasons for this situation**.

4. Financing academic mobility in Higher Education

Academic mobility improves the quality of education in HEIs. It is in the interest of governments and the international community to strategically promote cross-border educational mobility, non-recognition represents an additional source of discrimination, particularly for vulnerable populations seeking new opportunities or for those who are forced to move. **Our societies will benefit from the guarantee of the right to fair recognition procedures, and education systems will benefit from them**.

Transnational education issues are increasingly shaping global discussions about the future of academic mobility. Universities from countries with well-developed higher education systems export their study programmes to countries where local institutions are unable to meet the national demand for study places. As a result, students in these countries are no longer required to travel abroad to pursue a foreign degree. Transnational education is expected to increase rather than decrease participation in transnational student mobility. However, because mother universities are involved in the teaching and quality assurance of their programmes abroad, it creates a new need for faculty mobility.

It is important that substantial public funding is set to achieve the goal of wide access to high-quality mobility. Occasional grants should be topped with structural and institutional financing to ensure that no barriers are created at any point of the mobility period. Countries should be responsible for providing portable grants. Financial support for mobility should be a universal right and neither restricted based on merit nor parental income of the student nor based on work placements a student might take while on a mobility. While working towards portable grants in all countries should be the first priority, **destination countries should also be encouraged to devise scholarship schemes for international students, particularly in the case of disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds**.

5. Policy Recommendations

- **The students' rights must remain at the core of the mobility process, and strong representation of students in the development of such activities must be ensured**. An effective student representation should be established whenever new governing structures are devised. In the event of the establishment of any deep, comprehensive or structural collaboration between HEIs, students should have the same rights on access, tuition fees and student welfare. For each of these rights, **the minimum benchmark is set by the institution that has the highest standard**. Institutions must set out a clear roadmap for this upward convergence on students rights.

- **The quality of learning mobilities should be properly insured and not sacrificed with the excuse of an enriching intercultural experience**. International students must have the same rights regardless of the type of mobility they engage in - for example, no services should be exclusively reserved for full-degree students. The quality of international internships must be ensured, with a focus on learning, adequate supervision, and workload measured through fair and agreed tools.

- **To avoid mobility becoming the privilege of a few students with a good financial background, mobility must be sufficiently funded and support systems put in place**. Financing is at present the number one deterrent for students to be mobile. Student grants should be high enough to cover actual living costs in the host country, grants should be portable, and additional grants should be available to cover the extra costs associated with mobility. Travelling to home countries for major family events, holidays, or other life events can be economically challenging for students engaging in learning mobility. In the same way, having to travel to their home or host countries given exams or other academic tasks can also be an economic issue. Daily transportation needs in the host country should ideally be free for all students. In case it is not, a transportation pass should be provided for international students at the same price as for local students, and it should cover the entire mobility period. A financially supported mobility also means equal chances in access to higher education regarding **tuition fees**.

- **Mobility programs must oppose inequalities**. Therefore special programs and funding for students with disabilities and accessibility requirements need to be established, and HEIs should be given additional funding to provide suitable access for those groups. In order to make mobility a real opportunity for all, governments and higher education institutions need to take measures to widen access for all, in addition to taking a comprehensive approach to dismantling existing barriers to mobility.

- **Focusing on creating draft bridge courses that can be introduced in countries with undergraduate degrees of smaller lengths**. These draft courses can be translated into one year or likewise courses to make students eligible for graduate and postgraduate degrees in other countries. Creating of draft parallel bridge courses can be pursued alongside undergraduate degrees of smaller duration to add academic credibility.

- **Learning through another language than the student's first language makes mobility an academically and culturally enriching experience**, contributing to better integration in the hosting institution and country, and to students becoming responsible and active global citizens. The resources for tuition-free language courses of the destination country must be ensured, also taking into account students with special needs. Language courses that are not part of the curriculum should always be voluntary. Free language courses should be provided at the home institution prior to the mobility period to secure a sufficiently high level of both general and academic language knowledge to learn through a given language.

- **Free movement must be ensured for students, researchers and academic staff, who undertake academic mobility.** Bureaucracy and inconsistency in the provision of student visas and residency permits constitute barriers for both short and long-term mobility.

- **Promoting transnational education in universities** from countries with well-developed higher education systems to export their study programmes to countries where local institutions are unable to meet the national demand for study places, can contribute to the quality of teaching and research, opening a myriad of opportunities for faculty and students while furthering education as a human and social right.

All members of the academic community should be enabled to benefit from new opportunities to study and work abroad in the form of short courses and through an expanding range of opportunities to gain employability and skills. **With an increasing number of education hubs, offshore programmes, online tools, funding opportunities, democratic participation and learning opportunities, more students will be able to pursue an effective, fair, and sustainable international education**.

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