The Influence of European Student Mobility on Migration Aspirations

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“I wondered what one experiences when one crosses the border. What does one feel? What does one think? It must be a moment of great emotion, agitation, tension. What is it like, on the other side? It must certainly be – different.”


The Polish traveller-reporter Ryszard Kapuściński wrote in one of his last books about his desire to go abroad in the fifties, at the beginning of his – very successful – career. Due to the division of Europe into East and West at that time, it was difficult for him to realise his dream. Today, the scenery is radically different; moving within Europe has become much easier with the suppression of internal borders. Different forms of mobility are interconnected with the European unification process. One of these mobility forms is student mobility. The institutionalisation of international exchange programmes since the seventies and the harmonisation of study programmes with the much-cited Bologna Process leaded to an increase in temporary mobility of students towards other parts of Europe. However, mobile students still do only represent a minority of the total student population.² Nevertheless, student mobility can be considered as an integral part of the “new map of European migration” (King, 2002); a new form of migration which is embedded in a “context of transition from the local to the global, and the momentous opening up of spaces for communication, where mobility is conceived as a continuous and multiples process rather than as a one-way ticket” (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002 : 2). The phenomenon can be seen as a particular form of international migration (Caestecker & Rea, 2009; King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Van Mol, 2008), which is motivated by a mix of education/leisure/travel/experience goals, rather than by economic goals (King, 2002). Despite some efforts to frame student mobility within the European space theoretically over the last years (e.g. Findlay, Stam, King, & Ruiz-Gelices, 2005; King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Tsoukalas, 2008;

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² However, this trend can also be found in the general population. As Adrian Favell (2009) argues; less than 1 in every 50 European lives outside his country of origin.
Van Mol, 2009), much remains to be done. In this paper, we will address the influence of a study period abroad on future migration aspirations.

**Theoretical background**

At the institutional level, two rationales underline European exchange programmes; namely an economic and a civic one (Corbett, 2003; Papatsiba, 2003, 2006). The civic rationale aims to create European citizens, with the assumption that students who spent a study period in another European country would foster one. The economic rationale aims to promote the European labour market; former exchange students would move more easily to another Member State in their future career. The accent of political action lies above all on the economic rationale ultimately. Promoting the European labour market, the economic rationale has as an objective to increase the competitiveness of Europe in the global knowledge economies.

In the academic literature, it has often been assumed that there exist a causal relationship between a study period abroad and subsequent migration behaviour, even though empirical evidence remains limited (Parey & Waldinger, 2008). Over the last years, several studies have been published on international labour and skill exchange, but most research on the portability of human capital across countries focuses on immigrant groups and international student migrants, entering the debates of brain drain and brain gain. Little research has been conducted on labour market outcomes and future migratory behaviour of domestic students who participate in a mobility programme to another European country. The conducted studies until now (e.g. Bracht et al., 2006; Findlay, King, Stam, & Ruiz-Gelices, 2006; Parey & Waldinger, 2008; Teichler & Janson, 2007; Wiers-Jenssen, 2008; Wiers-Jenssen & Try, 2005) all conclude that a stay abroad enhances subsequent migration behaviour. However, several problems arise from these studies.

Firstly, the studies of Ulrich Teichler (e.g. Bracht et al., 2006; Teichler & Janson, 2007), considering the job opportunities of former ERASMUS students, do collect perceptions of such students, without comparing these with a control group of non-mobile students. Therefore, these studies show a distorted image, and are more likely to consider the ERASMUS programme as a success. Indeed, as Vassiliki Papatsiba (2006) and Christof Van Mol (2009) argue, it is not uncommon for those researchers studying student mobility to cope with overestimated statistics. A second groups of studied did include a control group of non-mobile students (e.g. Parey & Waldinger, 2008; Wiers-Jenssen, 2008), which already is an improvement. Matthias Parey and Fabian Waldinger (2008) demonstrated for example that
studying a period abroad increases an individual’s probability of working in a foreign country after graduation by 15 to 20 percentage points. Likewise, Jannecke Wiers-Jenssen (2008) showed that former mobile students hold more international jobs compared to their non-mobile peers. Moreover, she was able to show that students who undertook a combination of home-country education with international experience (as for example in the ERASMUS programme) held more international job in the domestic labour market compared to those students who spent their whole degree abroad.

Despite the inclusion of a control group of non-mobile students, they do draw on a sample of last-year students, who were assigned to the group of former mobile students or a control group of non-mobile students. However, for this paper we adopt a different approach. Some studies suggest that students who moved abroad prior to university are more likely to participate in mobility programmes during their degree (Findlay et al., 2006). For that reason it is important to include a pre-mobility phase in studies on international labour market outcomes of former mobile students. As Scott Myers (1999) argues; regardless of circumstances, some people are more likely to move than others. Research projects including such a pre-mobility phase have so far only been conducted in the context of the United States (e.g. Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009; Stroud, 2010). In Europe, evidence on pre-mobility migration aspirations of students is lacking. Therefore, our assumptions on students’ aspirations to study and work abroad rely mainly on the American literature on the pre-mobility phase and the existing literature on migrant personality (e.g. Boneva & Frieze, 2001; Frieze et al., 2004; Frieze, Hansen, & Boneva, 2006). Our research project departs from the same premise as the previous mentioned studies, namely that student mobility is influencing subsequent migration aspirations. In this paper, we focus on students in all stages of their career, thereby incorporating a pre-mobility context in the research design.

**Methodology**

**Sample**

The results presented in this paper are based on an online quantitative data collection held at the end of the 2008-2009 Academic Year at 13 European universities in 9 countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and Slovenia), and distributed to students of Social and Political Sciences; Business Studies & Economics;
Language Studies; and Engineering. Response rates could not be calculated, since not all universities provided us with the total number of students the invitation was sent to. However, for those universities where we could calculate the response rate, it was around 10 per cent. This low response rate seems to be typical for web surveys (Conrad, Couper, Tourangeau, & Peytchev, 2005; Fricker, 2008; Vehovar & Lozar Manfreda, 2008). The fact that the response rate did not exceed 10 per cent may be contributed to different reasons. The questionnaire was forwarded at the end of the Academic Year, so students might have been busy studying for their examinations, the invitation e-mail might have been considered as spam, and early drop-out students might even not have seen the invitation e-mail. Moreover, no incentives were offered to the students, since incentives seem to be less effective in online surveys compared to offline surveys (Göritz, 2006; Porter & Whitcomb, 2003). We restricted the database to national students (excluding international students and second generation immigrants), and filtered double answers out. Moreover, we filtered out students aged more than 26 years, in order not to introduce bias in the results and to obtain a comparable dataset. As a result, our final sample consisted of 2058 answers, the median age was 22. Analysis of gender distribution of the sample revealed that 68 per cent of the sample was female, versus 32 per cent male.

Instrument
The questionnaire was developed through the adaptation of existing questionnaires on European Student Mobility (e.g. Findlay et al., 2006; King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002), and refined after transcription and analysis of twenty-three explorative interviews with students (mobile as well as non-mobile) in February-March 2009 at the Universiteit Antwerpen (Belgium) and the Universitat de València (Spain). The design and structure of the survey were treated with care, since various authors suggested that these elements in an online survey can affect the response rate, the dropout rate, and even the quality of the responses (Couper, Traugott, & Lamias, 2001; Fan & Yan, 2010; Thorndike et al., 2009; Tourangeau, Couper, & Conrad, 2004). Additionally, answer categories were randomised where possible to reduce potential response bias. This resulted in a pilot version of the questionnaire which was tested with students of nineteen European countries in April 2009, distributed on students’ internet panels and in groups at social network sites such as Facebook. All scales proved to be consistent. Average completion time of the questionnaire was between five and twenty minutes and participants were free to backtrack and review all
responses before submitting the questionnaire. The part of the questionnaire used for this paper is the last part, which asked about students’ future perspectives.

Method
After completion of the data collection, students were divided into four different groups in order to compare their mean ranks. The first group consisted of the group of non-mobile students (n = 189), namely those students who answered “no” to the question “Would you like to spend some time abroad during the remainder of your degree?”. The second group, of potential mobile students (n = 589) was formed by students who answered “perhaps” at the same question. The third group consisted of future mobile students (n = 590), namely those students who answered “definitely” to the same question. The last group consisted of the mobile students (n = 685), namely those students who indicated that they spent a study period abroad.

To compare the four groups, we applied non-parametric analysis, since the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were not met. First, we applied the Monte Carlo version of the Kruskal-Wallis test – which can be considered as the non-parametric equivalent of a one-way independent ANOVA – for testing general differences between the four groups. Second, the Monte Carlo version of the Mann-Whitney test – the non-parametric counterpart of the independent t-test – between all groups on the differences that came out of the Kruskal-Wallis test. However, the use of many Mann-Whitney tests on the sample would inflate the Type I error rate. For that reason, a Bonferroni correction was applied on all the conducted Mann-Whitney tests. Consequently, all effects of these tests are reported at a 0.0083 level of significance.

Results
A first analysis of the database, applying a Kruskal-Wallis (Monte Carlo version), revealed that there exist significant differences between the four groups of students considering their imagination to live abroad after graduation, work aspirations abroad after graduation and job aspirations with an international component after graduation (see table 1).

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4 Nevertheless, we are aware of the discrepancy that might exist between aspirations to study abroad and the fact of studying abroad. Mobility aspirations do not always result in actual mobile behaviour (Boneva & Frieze, 2001; Stroud, 2010).
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$H(3)$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can imagine to live abroad for a year or more after graduation</td>
<td>453.12</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to work in a foreign country after graduation</td>
<td>412.34</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to have a job with an international component after graduation</td>
<td>472.31</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at the < .001 level

However, the Kruskal-Wallis test does not explain which groups do differ. Therefore, we conducted six Mann-Whitney tests between all groups. As table 2 shows, significant differences can be found between all groups on the first item, but considering the two other items, no differences could be found between the groups of mobile students and future mobile students. Moreover, in all analyses, we find a medium to large effect size (.3 criterion for the medium, and .5 for the large effect size). However, the effect size for the item “I can imagine to live abroad for a year or more after graduation” is rather small between the groups of future mobile and mobile students.

Therefore, table 2 indicates that mobile students do differ from the group of future mobile students on an experiential level, with their experience abroad they can easily imagine to go abroad again. However, the aspirations to work abroad or have a job with an international component after graduation already is present in the group of future mobile students, indicating that the influence of participation in an international exchange programme on international job aspirations might not be as big as previously stated by other studies. As a result, the real influence of an exchange period abroad on future migration aspirations remains largely undiscovered. However, following up the potential mobile students during the next years might be interesting in order to detect changes in this group towards mobility participation, and detect more precisely the real influence a study period abroad may have on future migration aspirations.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Non-mobile vs. Potential mobile</th>
<th>Non-mobile vs. Future mobile</th>
<th>Non-mobile vs. Mobile</th>
<th>Potential mobile vs. Future mobile</th>
<th>Potential mobile vs. Mobile</th>
<th>Future mobile vs. Mobile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can imagine to live abroad for a year or more after graduation</td>
<td>$U$ = 35071.5</td>
<td>20302.5</td>
<td>21040</td>
<td>106891</td>
<td>111416</td>
<td>187804.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$r = -0.29$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$-0.55$</td>
<td>$-0.36$</td>
<td>$-0.43$</td>
<td>$-0.08$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p = 0.000^*$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0.000^*$</td>
<td>$0.000^*$</td>
<td>$0.000^*$</td>
<td>$0.004^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to work in a foreign country after graduation</td>
<td>$U$ = 33530.5</td>
<td>17049.5</td>
<td>19332.5</td>
<td>105952</td>
<td>120692.5</td>
<td>198305.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$r = -0.30$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$-0.53$</td>
<td>$-0.36$</td>
<td>$-0.37$</td>
<td>$-0.02$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p = 0.000^*$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0.000^*$</td>
<td>$0.000^*$</td>
<td>$0.000^*$</td>
<td>$0.262$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to have a job with an international component after graduation</td>
<td>$U$ = 31207</td>
<td>15679.5</td>
<td>17255</td>
<td>108358</td>
<td>120052.5</td>
<td>194484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$r = -0.34$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$-0.59$</td>
<td>$-0.35$</td>
<td>$-0.39$</td>
<td>$-0.04$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p = 0.000^*$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0.000^*$</td>
<td>$0.000^*$</td>
<td>$0.000^*$</td>
<td>$0.073$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at the <.001 level.

** Significant at the <.0083 level.
Conclusion

Our results provide strong evidence that future mobile students do not differ from mobile students considering their future work aspirations abroad or wish to have an international job. They do differ considering their imagination to live abroad, but this might be contributed to the fact that mobile students already have first-hand-experience of living abroad. However, both groups do differ – statistically seen – on all aspects significantly from the other groups (considering these aspects). This finding is important, since it shows that most of the research results published until now – relying mostly on a sample of last-year students – are biased, and hence overestimate the effect of a stay abroad on migration behaviour.

As a result, more research into the real impact of international exchange programmes on student lives is needed. If we want to calculate the real impact of international exchange programmes on future migration aspirations, the group of potential mobile students might be useful. Therefore, we planned a follow-up data collection at the end of the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 Academic Years, and will divide the potential mobile students between those who went abroad and those who did not, in order to measure the real impact of those exchange programmes on aspirations.

References


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