Non-EU students’ potential challenges in Poland: the case of the City of Poznan

Swajan Das¹, Agata Kochaniewicz²

¹Faculty of International Business and Economics, Poznan University of Economics, Poland
²Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland

Correspondence: Swajan Das(john.swajan@gmail.com)

Abstract: Although, internationalization of Polish higher education is a new phenomenon, Poland is gradually becoming a popular study destination among international students. However, the country still lacks extensive research works on their circumstances. This paper aims to present non-EU students’ major ongoing challenges in the City of Poznan. The findings are taken from author’s own experience and others’ research findings at Migrant Info Point – a Poznan based immigrant advisory center. It is found that non-EU students often face difficulties while legalizing their stay and looking for accommodation. Beside these, their employment prospectus is also challenged because of linguistic barriers. Furthermore, immigration rules do not favor the graduates. To some extent, European students also face many of these challenges. Respective authorities need to acknowledge and resolve these obstacles immediately in order to retain and gain popularity.

Keywords: International Students, Migrant Info Point, City of Poznan, Poland


1. Problem Identification

In 2011, nearly 4.3 million students enrolled outside of their home country for tertiary education [OECD 2013]. Over a period of two decades, the number has increased by more than threefold and the movement of tertiary level students is expected to be double by 2020 [OECD 2013; PAP 2013; PAP 2014; StudyInPoland.pl 2015]. Globally, it is estimated that international students contribute around 100 billion USD to host countries annually; and in Poland, the figure is around 150 million Euros [StudyInPoland.pl 2015].

Presently, there are 46,101 foreign students from 158 countries are studying in Poland [StudyInPoland.pl 2015]. The country has seen an increase of 28% of foreign students’ enrollment from the last academic year. Now, the Polish government is targeting to host 5% of international students at its universities by 2020 [Łukaszczyszk 2013]. However, Poland mainly attracts students from Europe; and more than 50% of its all international students comes from Ukraine; but globally, more than 50% of all international students come from Asia [OECD 2013; StudyInPoland.pl 2015]. Although, recently, the country has experienced a tremendous growth of Asian students, especially, from China, Taiwan, India, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, at present, Poland has only around 12% of its all international students from Asia [StudyInPoland.pl 2015]. However, it is expected that Poland would equally be popular among the Asian students too.

Poznan, the capital city of Wielkopolska Voivodship (Greater Poland Region in English) and officially known as City of Poznan, is an academic city. Over 22% of its total inhabitants are student [Poznan 2015b]. Each year, the city graduates over 40,000 students from its 27 universities [Poznan 2015b; Poznan 2015a]. Gradually, Poznan is becoming a popular study destination among the foreign students too. Presently, over 2,000 international students from 80 countries are studying at universities in Poznan [Poznan 2015a].

Throughout the study period, international students possess the sensitivity of being just a visitor in foreign countries; thus, require them to seek for a constant assistance from host universities [Murphy et al. 2002]. All universities in Poznan those accept foreign students appoint student coordinators to help international students with their academic needs and day-to-day difficulties. In recent years, these universities are arranging events for international students, called Orientation Day, at the beginning of each academic year. These events are very important source of information for foreign students in order to ease their living in Poznan and Poland. During the event, students meet with university authorities, border guards, national health care representatives, Police and Migrant Info Point (MIP).

¹ Migrant Info Point (MIP) is a Poznan based free information and advisory support for immigrants centre part of Polish-German project AMIGA runs under Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan
employees, each of whom present basic facts related to international students’ living in Poland from their point of view. Nevertheless, huge amount of information given to students on same day often causes chaos. Therefore, many of them would still come, individually or in large group, to MIP with practical questions and concerns.

As universities, as well as the societies, gain plenty of benefits from hosting international students, academics and researchers are focusing on understanding international students’ circumstances; universities are changing their internationalization strategies; and central governments are changing student migration rules and regulations in order to gain the competitive advantages over competitors. Although plenty of research works have been conducted on international students and their circumstances around the world, Poland has few such research activities. This put the issue of acknowledging such necessity forward on the country’s context. Thus, this paper takes an initiative to present the non-European Union (non-EU) students’ major ongoing challenges in Poznan, Poland.

2. Study Background

Five key element of globalization, namely – I) the knowledge society II) information and communication technologies III) the market economy IV) trade liberalization and V) changes in governance structures, has changed the higher education (HE) sector globally [Knight 2008]. Scott [2000] claimed that the universities are probably facing the fundamental challenge in its long history due to the impact of globalization. He identified three main reasons – I) universities’ close association with its national cultures II) the impact of development of communication and information technology which demand standardization of teaching and the emergence of cross-cultural research activities and networks and III) national government’s minimalistic approach in terms of public expenditure is reducing the universities’ traditional and main source of income [Ivy 2001; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana 2007; Belanger et al. 2002; Mazzarol et al. 2003; Efimova 2014]. As a result, to seek for an alternative source of income, universities are expanding their operational activities beyond national boarders [Pimpa 2003; Lockwood & Hadd 2007]. Thus, the HE sector has become highly internationalized lately and continued its expansion across the world [Teichler 2004]. And through internationalization, universities are now competing with each other for students, staff, funding and last but not least, reputation [Federkeil 2008].

On the other hand, back in 1980s and 1990s, under the concept of service sector, global HE industry started emerging rapidly [Nadiri 2006]. In early days, adopting marketing concepts was ignored in HE sector because of its intangible nature [Mazzarol 1998]. However, later on, through classifying the HE as a marketable service like other services [Russell 2005; Wang 2007], a new dimension brought up into this sector [Knight 2008] and students turned into the customer of HE service [Nadiri & Mayboudi 2010]. In some countries, now, this sector contributes larger amount to national economy than the respective country’s important exporting products [Mazzarol 1998]. Currently, under the supervision of World Trade Organisation (WTO), General Agreements on Trade in Services (GATS) also classifies the HE as a tradable commodity [Brandenburg & Wit 2011]. Since students are in the core of academic activities, they are one of the main sources of income for HE institutions [Agoston & Dima 2012], thus, now, the multi-billion dollar HE industry adopts marketing strategies in order to maximize service revenues [Heaney & Heaney 2008]. Consequently, customer satisfaction is treated highly in order to retain and gain an institution’s popularity.

3. Material and Method

The presented issues and challenges in this paper are based on author’s own experience at MIP. It also includes findings and conclusions from other MIP employees’ (cultural anthropology researchers) research works.

MIP, an informational and advisory centre for foreigners, was created almost two years ago within the structures of Migration Research Centre under Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan as a part of Active Migrants in the Local Labor Market (AMIGA) project. MIP has 3 migrant advisers - all of them also conduct streetworking² and anthropological research.

MIP works in migrant circles (for international students beside other migrants) in such places where universities offering degree programmes for foreigners, dormitories or clubs in Poznan; and often keeps contact with foreign students for several months after initial interaction. These allow MIP to pinpoint integration barriers they often encounter in Poznan.

So far, around 450 foreigners from around 70 countries become benefited from MIP’s offerings. International students made up around quarter of all visitors. Among them, Ukrainian students were the most frequent visitors. The rests were rather multi-national patchwork than some regular phenomenon. MIP staffs were mainly giving them information and advices on the frame of legalization of stay, work and everyday life in Poznan. They were also monitoring migrants’ situation by the means of ethnographic fieldwork - recognizing the need of migrants and barriers to integration in the host country.

However, the pointed issues are also relevant for European students although they face comparatively lower challenges than non-European students in Poznan or Poland in macro context.

4. Major Challenges in Poznan

Legalization Problem

² Streetworking is a method based on individual assistance and support provided to migrants outside of office and regardless of the office operating hours
There are several main barriers and difficulties that usually bring foreign students (including those from EU countries) to MIP. In most cases, they come with issues related to procedure and requirements for legalizing their stay in Poland. Complicated legal procedures and linguistic barriers make the procedures seem almost impossible for them.

Very often students find it difficult to prove that they have sufficient financial means to cover living cost for 15 months or 12 months for scientific research (543 PLN per month) and cost for return trip (2500 PLN, if a foreigner comes from a non-EU country that does not border with Poland). For many students it is a large amount of money that has to be presented at once, while usually their families are only able to send them fixed amount of money on a regular basis. They often have to ask family or friends to transfer this amount to their bank accounts before lodging the application.

Another barrier is the application form itself. It has several pages and has to be filled in Polish only. That is practically impossible without someone’s help. Basic knowledge of Polish language might not be enough to fill-in all the required sections.

**Accommodation Problem**

As the semester starts, more and more students come to MIP for seeking help with finding an accommodation. In many cases, it is found that their chosen universities cannot guarantee them a place in dormitories. Therefore, they must look for an accommodation on their own. For them, it is highly difficult since most rental offers available on the Internet are in Polish only. Another common scenario is administrative workers’ inability to communicate in English. It prevents students to manage a place at dormitories by themselves.

When MIP tries to find an accommodation on students’ behalf, it often notices the practice of raising rent for foreigners. Offers in English are usually at a higher price than in Polish which gives no explanation by flats’ standard. Moreover, landlords who do not speak English are often afraid to rent a flat to foreigners.

**Polish Lesson**

Many students who hear that MIP offers free Polish lessons come to sign up for those classes. These students have Polish courses guaranteed by their respective universities. But it usually turns out that some of those courses are only available on an additional payment basis or not intensive enough or, in worst cases, only available from second semester. This is a huge problem, especially, for non-EU students because many of them count on finding a temporary job or working during summer holidays and realize how hard it would be without knowing any Polish at all. Students who consider prolonging their stay after graduation to find a job are also very much interested in learning Polish. However, MIP cannot help them because its courses are only dedicated to migrants who experience difficulties to find a job.

**Seeking Employment**

The intention of seeking an employment is very common among students from outside of EU, although they are not often aware of the necessary procedures. Sometimes they do not even know whether they need a work permit. However, it is not easy to find a temporary job in Poznan without knowing the Polish language (the most common jobs are in gastronomy sector).

It is worth mentioning that Polish government recently introduced a new law concerning foreigners on May 01, 2014. It aims to ease foreigners’ stay in Poland. It facilitates foreign graduates (from colleges, universities or PhD programmes in Poland) to enter into Polish labour market. Since last year, they can apply for a stay permit based on their attempts to find an employment. However, this facilitation comes under question. In an article for Gazeta Prawna, Karolina Mazurczak from Legal Intervention Association points out that “this procedure requires proofs of stable and regular means of living which, as it concerns individuals seeking employment, is extremely irrational” [Rabiega 2015].

**5. Conclusion**

Poznan is an academic-oriented city and the number of international student is growing each year. Thus, both city authorities and institutions which invite foreigners need to have more practical approaches and develop their service standard.

International students are certainly not only to be perceived as the ‘ones who generate income’ for local economy but also the ones with high potential for local socio-cultural development. It seems rational that universities which accept foreign students shall guarantee them accommodation facilities in dormitories in which administrative workers speak English. Students from non-EU member countries, who find it difficult to stay in Poland after graduation, need to provide with opportunities to learn the local language freely. It is equally important to provide international students with opportunities to develop their professional careers. Universities also need to assist their international graduates in order to find an employment. Obviously this issue cannot be reflected upon without noticing the broader context of national migration policy. Nevertheless, good practices introduced by individual universities would be an important step on the long road towards the decent conditions for migrant integration in the City of Poznan and Poland in broad context.

Nonetheless, this paper has several limitations. The foremost one is the spatial scope. Here, the presented findings are only from one city and not compared with the circumstances of international students from other cities in Poland. Thus, their overall challenges may differ from these findings. It also ignores the views of international students who did not come to seek for assistances at MIP. In order to be specific about the Non-EU students’ circumstances in Poland, this kind of study requires an in-depth research at different city levels on a wide scale.
And in order to realize the central government’s strategic plan of being an academic hub in Central Europe, Poland needs to understand the international students’ circumstances intensively, thus, requires massive research works. Since internationalization of HE is still at its initial stage in Poland, the author highly recommends conducting research on international students’ satisfaction level in terms of academic expectation and socio-cultural adjustments immediately.

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