Obstacles to International Student Mobility: the Case of Poland

Paweł Bryła¹, Beata Ciabiada²

¹University of Lodz, Faculty of International and Political Studies, Department of International Marketing and Retailing, Narutowicza 59a, 90-131 Lodz, Poland
²Medical University of Lodz, Faculty of Public Health, Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Zeligowskiego 7/9, 90-742 Lodz, Poland

Correspondence: Paweł Bryła (pbryla@uni.lodz.pl)

Abstract This paper aims to analyse obstacles to international student mobility in Poland at the level of university education. We provide selected results of our empirical study among non-mobile Polish students. According to our study subjects, the following reasons for the decision not to study abroad were the most important: insufficient financial support, fear of separation from one’s partner or family, lack of motivation, insufficient information about mobility opportunities, fear of losing one’s job, and an obligation to take care of one’s child or parent. We review the literature of the subject concerning outward student mobility barriers.

Keywords: international student mobility; Poland; Erasmus; obstacles to mobility; study abroad; international education

Introduction

For a variety of reasons, universities are increasingly seeking to develop internationalization strategies and programmes as a part of their evolving institutional missions (Tadaki and Tremewan 2013). Universities communicate their international programs to attract prospective students interested in studying abroad (Kincl et al. 2013). Internationalization of higher education is becoming an important topic for studies in educational research (Nikitina and Furuoka 2012). Mobility is considered as one of the 5 key development factors for Poland, alongside trust, cohesion, creativity and competitiveness (Boni 2009: 8-11). The document identifying strategic challenges until 2030 emphasises the importance on mobility and adaptability as well as lifelong learning for contemporary labour markets. Mobility is also understood as freedom to cross national borders and look for a job abroad, which increases the importance of openness to intercultural experiences. Occupational, virtual, life-course and geographical mobility is considered a development factor (Boni 2009: 233). This paper aims to analyse obstacles to international student mobility in Poland. We review the literature of the subject concerning outward student mobility barriers. Furthermore, we provide selected results of our empirical study among non-mobile Polish students.

Materials and Methods

We surveyed all graduates from the Faculty of International and Political Studies of the University of Lodz (2128 study subjects) and received 81 responses from alumni who had not taken part in international student mobility. The survey was conducted online at moje-ankiety.pl. Invitations to participate were sent by email. The obtained data were analysed with the use of MS Excel.

Results

This paper focuses on obstacles to mobility, thus we report below the results obtained from this group of alumni who did not engage in international student mobility. Among those Polish students who were internationally immobile (81 study subjects), the following reasons for the decision not to study abroad were the most important: insufficient financial support, fear of separation from one’s partner or family, lack of motivation, insufficient information about mobility opportunities, fear of losing one’s job, and an obligation to take care of one’s child or parent (Table 1). Other reasons which were mentioned spontaneously by our respondents included: having a second field of study in Poland, the necessity to catch up with the study programme after the return, preferring to take part in summer jobs abroad.
Table 1. Reasons for the decision not to study abroad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for the decision not to study abroad</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Fraction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient financial support</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of separation from one’s partner or family</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of motivation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of information about mobility opportunities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of losing one’ job</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obligation to take care of a child or parent</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few international mobility opportunities at one’s university</td>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>0.074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient foreign language skills</td>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>0.074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No time for an international experience within one’s programme of study</td>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>0.074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear about the quality of mobility experience</td>
<td>10-12</td>
<td>0.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear about recognition of academic work completed abroad</td>
<td>10-12</td>
<td>0.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reasons</td>
<td>10-12</td>
<td>0.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal barriers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.037</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own research

Among those Polish students who were internationally immobile (81 study subjects), the following reasons for the decision not to study abroad were the most important: insufficient financial support, fear of separation from one’s partner or family, lack of motivation, insufficient information about mobility opportunities, fear of losing one’s job, and an obligation to take care of one’s child or parent (Table 1). Other reasons which were mentioned spontaneously by our respondents included: having a second field of study in Poland, the necessity to catch up with the study programme after the return, preferring to take part in summer jobs abroad.

Discussion

Although it is possible to benefit from student experiential learning in global virtual teams (Taras et al. 2013), international student mobility has its strong merits. Participation in international student mobility for a period of studies abroad constitutes an important element of university education and has clear implications for professional careers of graduates. For instance, in Norway, those studying abroad are more satisfied with their educational institution, and they put more effort into their studies than non-mobile students (Wiers-Jenssen 2003) as well as highest job probabilities were found among those who had parts of their education from abroad (Wiers-Jenssen and Try 2005). International student mobility has emerged as a key source of societal and educational transformations, as it was confirmed by evidence from East Asia, with international competencies being increasingly valued by employees and employers alike (Oleksiyenko et al. 2013). Pyvis and Chapman (2007) distinguished two types of reasons for seeking an international education in Malaysia: valuing it as a passport for employment or making self-transformative investments. International education may be linked to social transformation currently occurring in China (Xiang and Shen 2009). There is a need for the development of entrepreneurial potentials within education systems (Mitrovic et al. 2013), which may be supported by international student mobility. As student satisfaction becomes increasingly important (Sadilek 2013), international student mobility may affect its level.

Vossensteyn et al. (2010: 41-42) analysed a variety of potential factors that may hinder or facilitate students’ choice to participate in the Erasmus programme and identified five dimensions for potential barriers: financial issues, personal motivation, awareness about the programme, administrative conditions of the Erasmus mobility, and incompatibility between Higher Education systems. The personal motivation dimension has several aspects: perceived benefits, general pressure for a study abroad experience, language barrier, and personal considerations (e.g. a partner at home, care taking relationships, and employment). Rumbley (2011: 192) identified the following obstacles to student mobility on the basis of a literature review:

1) a lack of information about mobility opportunities;
2) low motivation levels or little to no personal interest in being mobile;
3) inadequate financial support;
4) foreign language skills deficiencies;
5) a sense of insufficient time or space for an international experience within the framework of an established curriculum or programme of study (for those considering temporary mobility within a degree programme);
6) concerns about the quality of mobility experiences;
7) legal barriers, particularly relating to visa and immigration issues; and
8) problems gaining recognition for academic work completed abroad. A Chinese study found that the intention to study abroad of students in less developed cities becomes increasingly lower than the intention of students in better off cities for every unit increase in the perceived attraction of better quality instruction if the
students expect to fund their overseas studies by self-financing or loans (Hung 2010).

In the *Youth on the move* survey (European Commission 2011: 45-48), Polish respondents were asked about the reasons they had not spent any time abroad for education, training, working or volunteering. In reply they mentioned most often that simply they were not interested in going abroad. This answer was less frequent among other nationalities. The second most important reason for not going abroad reported by Polish respondents was a lack of funding or that it was too expensive. This answer was slightly more popular in Poland than on average in Europe. The third most important obstacle to mobility was family commitments, mentioned by 24% of young Poles.

It is worth considering obstacles dissuading students from realising a foreign enrolment period. For the majority of Polish students who have not been enrolled abroad the additional financial burden is the most critical obstacle (74%). The separation from the partner, child(ren) and friends is the second biggest obstacle in case of Poland. 59% of Polish students who have not been enrolled abroad perceive the separation as a big obstacle. Third biggest obstacle to Polish students to enrol abroad is the perceived lack of language skills (48%). In Poland 36% of students who do not have study-related experience abroad the expected delay in progress of studies is of much greater concern. 35% of students are afraid they will have problems with recognition of results achieved abroad. Some of the Polish students who have not been enrolled abroad (27%) admit they have problems in getting information about mobility opportunities (Orr et al. 2011: 177).

Polish non-mobile students considered the following factors as important or very important reasons for not taking part in Erasmus (Vossensteyn et al. 2010: 87): will take part at a later date (indicated by 51% of respondents); Erasmus grant was insufficient to cover additional costs of period abroad (43%); lack of study programmes in English in hosting institution abroad (37%); expected difficulties with the recognition of credits in my home institution (33%); lack of integration/continuity between study subjects at home and abroad (30%); lack of language skills to follow a course abroad (29%); family reasons or personal relationships (29%); uncertainty about education system abroad (e.g. examinations) (28%); need to delay studies due to the study period abroad (27%); high competition to obtain an Erasmus grant (25%); was not offered my preferred institution abroad (24%); difficulties to find appropriate institution and/or study programme abroad (23%); I would lose part of my income in home country (due to job, lack of flexibility of student financing system in my country of study, etc.) (22%); it was not possible to choose the institution abroad myself (21%). The financial barrier to participation in Erasmus was particularly strong in Spain followed by Poland (Vossensteyn et al. 2010: 44-45).

It is worth establishing the percentage of students who have not been enrolled abroad considering certain issues as (big) obstacles to an enrolment abroad by social background. In Poland around 62% of students with low education background who have not been enrolled abroad would not enrol abroad because of financial insecurities. For 38% students with high education background additional financial burden is of much greater concern. Those numbers shows that the difference between those two groups is significantly large. When discussing the lack of language competency almost 80% of Polish students with low education background perceive it as a (big) obstacle to foreign enrolment. In comparison, the share of students with high education background perceiving this obstacle as big is relatively smaller – around 40% (Orr et al. 2011: 178). In spite of a much broader access to higher education in Poland than before, the social structure of student population has not dramatically changed (Borowicz 2011).

Despite the positive general evaluation of their Erasmus mobility, Polish students tend to complain about the insufficient level of the Erasmus grant (only 20% evaluated it as 4 or 5, 50% as 3, and the remaining 30% even lower). However, since the number of Polish outgoing Erasmus students continues to grow, it seems that the financial aspect does not play the decisive role (Kolanowska 2008a: 85). Polish outgoing students tend to complain about financial constraints of their mobility more often than their colleagues from other countries. In the 2010 ESN survey (Alfranseder 2011: 26-27), 20.2% of Polish outgoing students said they felt excluded from student life abroad due to financial constraints (compared to the average of 12.5%). 28.0% said that the grant amount affected their choice of study (compared to 26.1% on average). As many as 17.3% agreed on the statement that it was very difficult to live abroad with the money they had (compared to 9.9% on average).

In the survey conducted by Vossensteyn et al. (2010: 76), Polish outgoing students considered the following factors as important or very important difficulties encountered when preparing for the Erasmus study period abroad: Erasmus grant levels are low (indicated by 68% of respondents); uncertainty about the costs of the study abroad (54%); lack of other financial resources needed to study abroad (e.g. because of a need to leave a job, difference in the costs of living, need to take up accommodation outside parental home, etc.) (53%); uncertainty about the Erasmus grant level (44%); lack of integration/continuity between study subjects at home and abroad (36%); expected difficulties with the recognition of credits in my home institution (30%); the study period abroad was too short (30%); difficulties with any other administrative requirements (in home institution or abroad) (26%).

One of significant obstacles to Erasmus student mobility is the necessity to pass additional exams after the return from the study period abroad. In the study of Kolanowska (2008b: 21-22), 65.9% of faculty Erasmus co-ordinators indicated that some Erasmus outgoing students needed to take additional exams in Poland after their return, but they did not have to attend these courses, whereas 30.6% of respondents pointed out that certain returning Erasmus students need to not only take additional exams, but also attend the courses in Poland. Even though 87% of Erasmus outgoing students are informed which courses they will have to complete after their return, the mere obligation to fulfil this requirement may be considered an obstacle to Erasmus student mobility. These exams concern those courses that are included in the study programme in Poland and have not been completed abroad. It may happen for various reasons, most often because they are not offered by the partner
university, as study programmes are not standardised at the European level. Differences in study programmes were mentioned as the main reason of difficulties with recognising a study period abroad by 75.3% of respondents. The next most important reason was lack of precise information on study programmes provided by the partner university (51.7%). The respondents indicated less frequently too general character of the Learning Agreement (15.3%), the lack of clear decision-making procedures regarding the recognition of the study period abroad at the home university (9.4%), and other reasons (14.1%), including: requirements of certain core subjects to be included in a given study programme required by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education (called teaching standards or programme minima), not running a course which had been in the Learning Agreement, delays in sending the Transcript of Records by the foreign partner, failing an exam by the student, the specificity of certain courses, forcing the outgoing Erasmus students to follow courses designed for lower years of studies, and lack of availability of certain courses in a widely known foreign language (the course being delivered only in the local language). A lack of special language courses for outgoing Erasmus students may constitute an obstacle to student mobility. In the study of Kolanowska (2008b: 12-13), 59.7% of respondents admitted they did not organise such language training. Ernst & Young (2010: 78) indicated that the organisation of studies based on a rigid assignment of courses to semesters, exams after a few semesters of the same course, and a shortage of information on curricula and exam criteria constituted an important obstacle to mobility. In spite of learning agreements having been signed, there are cases of not recognising the grades and requiring the students to take courses included in the home university programme.

Almost 30% of respondents admitted not providing practical and/or cultural preparation for outgoing students, and 15% did not equip the outgoing students with information materials on the host country (Kolanowska 2008b: 13), which may also constitute obstacles to outward student mobility. The situation may be aggravated by a relatively low prevalence of former Erasmus student association branches, as only 18.2% of Polish universities confirmed they had such an organisation, in particular a branch of the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), but also associations called “To be Erasmus”, “Student Cooperation Centre” and “Erasmus Club”.

Saryusz-Wolski and Piotrowska (2011: 44-48) consider the following 3 obstacles to student mobility as the most relevant. First, there is a lack of appropriate awareness and motivation among university professors. As the university faculty members have a strong impact on shaping the students’ need for mobility, they should not be left out from the analysis. Many of them fail to notice the benefits of international and intercultural experiences in the education process. In spite of the official stance of bodies responsible for international co-operation, many ‘ordinary’ university professors communicate to their students only potential problems related to their mobility, such as: differences in curricula and difficulties to continue the studies after the return from mobility. Low mobility levels among university professors reflect the conviction of numerous members of the faculty that mobility is not necessary for one’s development. Second, the quoted authors emphasise the significance of the lack of information and schemes eliminating students’ fears connected with their mobility. There is a lack of information not only concerning organisational issues related to mobility, but also about the benefits of having international experience. It is important to break the stereotype that mobility is targeted only at the best-performing students. Mobility should not be treated as a reward, but rather as a normal and regular element of studies. There is ample evidence that average or poorly performing students at the home university may cope very well abroad. In fact, many of them return after a kind of transformation improving their attitude to learning at the home university. Experiencing different teaching methods makes the student discover more effective paths of learning, acquiring knowledge and competencies, which they transpose to their individual studying mechanism at the home university. In order to get the student mobile, the notion of mobility should function on a day-to-day basis at the home university. It is not sufficient to organise a few information meetings for students, but there should be intensive promotion showing the real values of mobility through meetings with foreign students, seminars and discussions. A serious information gap results from the lack of clearly defined mechanisms of recognising the period of studies abroad and teaching effects at the host university. Otherwise, some students may be afraid of their inability to make up the courses they would miss at the home university during their mobility. An important barrier to student mobility may also be psychological and emotional. Some students have a strong emotional attachment to their parents and family, which may reduce their international mobility.

Third, Saryusz-Wolski and Piotrowska identified the lack of appropriate preparation of students as a major obstacle to their mobility. They mentioned under this heading insufficient foreign language competence. Many universities fail to appreciate the role of foreign language competence for employability of their graduates.

According to Martowska (2011: 161-164), the international mobility of Polish doctoral students is limited due to a lack of a strategy aiming to promote mobility and a lack of coherent activities to overcome administrative and legal barriers to mobility.

Conclusions

The promotion of internationalisation of universities, including international mobility of students, is high on the Polish political agenda and receives a unanimous support from all governmental institutions. Poland tends to attract more and more foreign students as well as it displays an impressive dynamic regarding the number of outgoing students. However, if we relate the number of Erasmus students to the total population of students, the picture for Poland is no longer so rosy. It ranks at the bottom of the European table with just 0.65% of students participating in Erasmus during the academic year 2009/10 (Członkowska-Naumiuk 2011: 22). The obstacles to international student mobility of Polish students are manifold. According to our study subjects – non-mobile (former) students, the principal reasons for the decision
not to study abroad include: insufficient financial support, fear of separation from one’s partner or family, lack of motivation, insufficient information about mobility opportunities, fear of losing one’s job, and an obligation to take care of one’s child or parent.

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