THE INFLUENCE OF STUDENT MOBILITY ON FUTURE MIGRATION ASPIRATIONS. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM EUROPE AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO STUDY THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES.

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ABSTRACT

Student mobility within the European space increased over the last decades, due to the internationalisation and harmonisation of university degrees. One of the underlining rationales of European exchange programmes is economic in nature. This rationale aims to promote the European labour market, with the assumption that former exchange students would move more easily to another Member State during their future career. In this article, I will centre on the link between student mobility within the European space and future migration aspirations, with a focus on my own research project, and formulate some methodological recommendations for the study of the impact of exchange programmes on students' lives.

Today, at most European institutions for Higher Education, it is impossible to imagine student life without the presence of international exchange students, with the ERASMUS-programme as the best-known example. This programme was founded in 1987, as the successor of the European Joint-Study Programmes. Since then, with the internationalisation and harmonisation of study programmes during the last decades – and in the framework of the Bologna Process since the end of the nineties – temporary student mobility within Europe increased. However, until now mobile students only represent a minority of the total student population. The aim of the European Commission was to send out ten percent of all graduate students by 2010 – and since 2009 the ambitious new goal of twenty percent by 2020 –, but this objective has never been met. This rather low participation rate reflects a general pattern that can be found in the European population; less than two percent of all Europeans live outside their country of origin (Favell 2009). However, participation rates are slowly increasing, and student mobility can be considered as an integral part of the "new map of European migration" today (King 2002). The phenomenon can be seen as a particular form of international migration (Van Mol 2008), which differs from more traditional migration flows that are commonly characterised as driven by economic goals. Student mobility, in contrast, is mainly motivated by experience/travel/leisure goals (King 2002). Nevertheless, student mobility has long been neglected as a research topic in Europe, and publications on the subject started only from 2000 onwards – even though there are some exceptions (see for example the work of Ulrich Teichler, who has been doing research on student mobility within Europe since the beginning of the nineties, with a specific focus on the ERASMUS-programme). However, many studies remain limited to descriptive statistics, focus on debates such as the relation between mobility and brain drain, and remain mostly nationally framed, despite the international character of the phenomenon. Notwithstanding the efforts of some authors to frame European student mobility theoretically over the last years (e.g. Byram and Dervin 2008; Murphy-Lejeune 2002; Papatsiba 2003), much remains to be done. In this article, I will focus on the link between student mobility within the European space and future migration aspirations, and formulate some

methodological recommendations for the study of the impact of international exchange programmes.

STUDENT MOBILITY AS A LEVER FOR THE EUROPEAN LABOUR MARKET

As indicated earlier, student mobility has become more visible in Europe due to the institutionalisation of exchange programmes between institutions of Higher Education. Two underlying rationales can be found; a civic and an economic one. The civic rationale aims to create European citizens, with the assumption that students who spent a study period in another European country would foster a European identity. The economic rationale – the focus of this article – aims to promote the European labour market; former exchange students would move more easily to another Member State during their future career. Therefore, European exchange programmes are considered an instrument to increase the competitiveness of Europe in the global knowledge economies.

In the academic literature it has often been assumed that there exists a causal relationship between a study period abroad and subsequent migration behaviour, even though empirical evidence on this issue remains limited (Parey and Waldinger 2007), especially in Europe. 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 from outside Europe. In contrast, very few studies have been conducted on labour market outcomes and future migratory behaviour of domestic students who spent a study period abroad in another European country. The studies conducted until now (e.g. Findlay, King, Stam and Ruiz-Gelices 2006; Parey and Waldinger 2007; Teichler and Janson 2007; Wiers-Jenssen 2008) all conclude that a stay abroad enhances subsequent migration behaviour and international job aspirations. However, these studies are not without methodological problems, and could overestimate the impact of international exchange programmes on peoples' lives.

The methodological comments that can be made are twofold. First, the studies conducted by the research group of Ulrich Teichler discuss the job opportunities of former ERASMUS students, and collected perceptions of former mobile students, without comparing these with a control group of non-mobile studies. Second, an improvement on the previous studies are those who include a control group, such as the work of Matthias Parey and Fabian Waldinger (2007), and Jannecke Wiers-Jenssen (2008). However, these studies 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. Since previous research confirms that students who moved abroad prior to their enrolment in university are more likely to participate in mobility programmes during their degree (Findlay et al. 2006), these studies might be biased. For that reason, it is important to include a pre-mobility phase in studies that try to grasp the impact of international exchange programmes on individuals. Research projects with a pre-mobility phase have so far only been conducted in the context of the United States; in Europe, evidence on pre-mobility aspirations of students is still lacking. My research project departs from the same premise as the previous mentioned studies, namely that student mobility influences subsequent migration aspirations and international job aspirations, but it includes a pre-mobility context in the research design.

METHODOLOGY

The results presented in this article 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, for a detailed list of all participating universities, see www.ua.ac.be/cemis/esm). The questionnaire was distributed to students of Social and Political Sciences; Business Studies & Economics; Language Studies; and Engineering. After completing the data collection, the final database was restricted to domestic students (excluding international students and second generation immigrants). Students aged older than 26 years were also filtered out, in order to obtain a comparable dataset. As a result, our final sample consisted of 2058 respondents, 68 percent female versus 32 percent male.

The questionnaire was developed by adapting existing questionnaires, and was refined after transcription and analysis of twenty-three explorative interviews with students (both mobile and non-mobile) in February-March 2009 at the Universiteit Antwerpen (Belgium) and the Universitat de València (Spain). This resulted in a pilot version of the questionnaire, which was distributed to students of nineteen European countries on students' internet panels and in groups at social network sites such as Facebook. All scales proved to be consistent.

After obtaining the final data set, students were divided into four different groups in order to compare their mean ranks. The first group consisted of non-mobile students (n = 189), namely those students who did not want to spend a study period abroad during their university degree. The second group, of potential mobile students (n = 589), was formed by students who were still doubting whether or not to participate in an international exchange. The third group consisted of future mobile students

(n = 590), namely those students who definitely wanted to go abroad during the remainder of their university career – although we are aware of the discrepancy that might exist between aspirations to study abroad and the fact of studying abroad. 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, non-parametric analysis was applied.

RESULTS

In the analysis, we compared the four groups of students on several items. In this article, I will focus on three of them, namely living abroad after graduation as a valuable option for students' future life, aspirations to work abroad, and aspirations for a job with an international component after graduation. These items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "not at all" to "very much". As table 1 shows, the mean increases linearly from a low agreement for the group of non-mobile students towards a high level of agreement for mobile students.

TABLE 1: Mean scores for the four groups on three items

	GROUP	N	MEAN
I CAN IMAGINE TO LIVE ABROAD FOR A YEAR OR MORE AFTER GRADUATION	Non-mobile	189	3.02
	Potential mobile	589	3.93
	Future mobile	590	4.55
	Mobile	685	4.64
	Total	**2,053**	**4.26**
I WOULD LIKE TO WORK IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY AFTER GRADUATION	Non-mobile	189	2.65
	Potential mobile	589	3.56
	Future mobile	590	4.33
	Mobile	685	4.35
	Total	**2,053**	**3.96**
I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE A JOB WITH AN NTERNATIONAL COMPONENT AFTER GRADUATION	Non-mobile	189	2.91
	Potential mobile	589	3.91
	Future mobile	590	4.56
	Mobile	685	4.60
	Total	**2,053**	**4.24**

However, a single glance at the mean values does not explain to us whether statistical differences exist between the groups. Therefore, we applied an analysis which allows us to detect statistically significant differences between the groups (see table 2).

As can be observed, significant differences can be found on all items (the *p*-value is below .001). However, table 2 only points out that there are differences somewhere, but does not explain which groups did statistically differ from the others. For that reason, we applied additional tests. As table 3 shows, significant differences can be found between all groups on the first item ("I can imagine to live abroad for a year or more after graduation"), but considering the aspirations to work abroad after graduation or obtain a job with an international component, no significant differences could be found between the groups of mobile and future mobile students. Moreover, in all analyses – except the one between the mobile and future mobile students – a medium to large effect size could be found (.3 is the criterion for a medium, and .5 for a large effect size).

TABLE 2: Kruskal-Wallis test (Monte Carlo version) for detecting differences

	H(3)	P
I CAN IMAGINE TO LIVE ABROAD FOR A YEAR OR MORE AFTER GRADUATION	453.12	.000*
I WOULD LIKE TO WORK IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY AFTER GRADUATION	412.34	.000*
I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE A JOB WITH AN INTERNATIONAL COMPONENT AFTER GRADUATION	472.31	.000*

* Significant at the < .001 level

Considering the item "I can imagine to live abroad for a year or more after graduation", the statistical difference between mobile and future mobile students may point at a difference in first-hand experience between these groups, since mobile students can imagine more vividly to live abroad, which might be due to their study period abroad. However, since no differences in professional aspirations could be found between those two groups, there are some implications for the study of the impact of mobility programmes on students' lives, which will be discussed in the last section.

CONCLUSION – METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF IMPACT OF AN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMME

Student mobility in Europe increased steadily over the last decades due to the internationalisation and harmonisation of university degrees in Europe. One of the rationales of the European Commission to stimulate student mobility has been the assumed link between participation in an international exchange programme and future migratory behaviour, which would help Europe to strengthen their position in the global knowledge economies. Several academic studies confirmed this link between student mobility and migratory behaviour. However, in this article, I have shown that mobile students (those students with an international mobility experience during their university career) do differ with the students who stay at home considering their imagination to live abroad after graduation, their international job aspirations and their

TABLE 3: Mann-Whitney tests between all groups

ITEM		NON-MOBILE VS. POTENTIAL MOBILE	NON-MOBILE VS. FUTURE MOBILE	NON-MOBILE VS. MOBILE	POTENTIAL MOBILE VS. FUTURE MOBILE	POTENTIAL MOBILE VS. MOBILE	FUTURE MOBILE VS. MOBILE
I CAN IMAGINE TO LIVE ABROAD FOR A YEAR OR MORE AFTER GRADUATION	*U*	35071.5	20302.5	21040	106891	111416	187804.5
	r	-0.29	-0.52	-0.55	-0.36	-0.43	-0.08
	p	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.004**
I WOULD LIKE TO WORK IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY AFTER GRADUATION	*U*	33530.5	17049.5	19332.5	105952	120692.5	198305.5
	r	-0.30	-0.55	-0.53	-0.36	-0.37	-0.02
	p	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.262
I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE A JOB WITH AN INTERNATIONAL COMPONENT AFTER GRADUATION	*U*	31207	15679.5	17255	108358	120052.5	194484
	r	-0.34	-0.59	-0.59	-0.35	-0.39	-0.04
	p	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.073

* Significant at the <.001 level. ** Significant at the <.0083 level.

aspirations to work abroad. Interestingly, no statistically significant differences could be found between the mobile students and future mobile students (those students who are definitely sure to participate in an exchange programme during their university degree). This finding is important, since it has some methodological implications for the study of the effects of a study programme abroad.

We can conclude that research projects based on a survey with last-year graduate students do not take into account the fact that some students do already have international orientations and aspirations before leaving abroad in the mark of an exchange programme, and these studies may hence overestimate the impact of such a programme. Indeed, as Scott Myers (1999) argues; regardless of circumstances, some people are more likely to move than others. For that reason, if we want to measure the impact of a study abroad programme, we should know the attitudes, opinions and aspirations of the students before going abroad, and include a pre-mobility phase in the research design. Moreover, a control group of non-mobile students should always be included to contrast the changes that can be detected over time in the group of mobile students with those who stay abroad. This way, the real impact of international programmes can be measured, and not merely a biased approximation.

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