

## **Students and academic staff international mobility - a supplementary tool for better learning**

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**ABSTRACT:** For the past several years European higher education institutions (HEIs) have been increasingly facing the need to create a more diverse range of international activities. Universities are searching for new internationalisation tools to implement those activities more effectively in terms of finance and time. Learning mobility plays a great role in the process of quality assurance in higher education, expanding cross-border collaboration within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and beyond, and enhancing students' employability. A clear positioning of a country and identification of its strengths should be given special consideration. The image of the country, e.g. educational system, study and living standards and migration policy, have to be emphasised to win the attention of both international partners and prospective international students. A national strategy (with major strategic directions, priority activities for HE internationalisation, national financing, etc) is needed to support national HEIs in co-operative endeavours and in competitive efforts, taking account of the new European initiatives and aiming at non-EU regions.

### INTRODUCTION

Education and training are crucial to the well-being of every EU citizen to a growing, productive and competitive Europe, facing challenges of globalisation and modernisation. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) aims at ensuring more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe. Many governments see higher education as playing an important role in wider economic and political/foreign policies. Many countries are now encouraging their higher education institutions (HEIs) to internationalise their activities, recognising the economic, social and political benefits that will flow from it. More general government policies can also be encouraging of internationalisation, especially those which encourage HEIs to be more entrepreneurial.

The development of more flexible forms of delivery, combining traditional and less traditional methods, and taking advantage of recent technological developments, also have a key enabling role to play in increasing the options for internationalisation. The attempts within the Bologna Process to facilitate the comparability of educational programmes and degrees are testament that mobility in the area of higher education is not only desirable, but also needed in order to make European higher education attractive within a global context [1].

### ERASMUS PROGRAMME SUCCESS

Celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2012, The Erasmus Programme (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) is the most successful student exchange programme in the world. Each year, more than 230,000 students study abroad thanks to the Erasmus programme. In 2012, Erasmus counted over 4,400 higher education institutions as members. In 1987, 3,244 students from 11 countries spent a study period abroad under the Erasmus Programme. In 2011-12 the number of Erasmus students exceeded 250,000 (77 times more) (Table 1, Figure 1, Figure 2).

Thanks to the Programme, more than 46 000 staff from 33 European countries spent time abroad. The annual budget is in excess of €450 million; more than 4 000 higher education institutions in 33 countries participate, and more are willing to join. The highest numbers of outgoing Erasmus students as a proportion of the national student population in 2011-12 were reported in Luxembourg, Liechtenstein, Spain, Latvia and Lithuania.

Work placements in companies abroad have been supported through Erasmus only since 2007. A total of 35,785 enterprises across Europe received Erasmus placement students in 2011-12. Around 45.5% of the enterprises were small, 32.4% medium-sized and 22.1% were large. Students of social sciences, business and law made up the biggest share (31.9%) of trainees. The second biggest share was that of students of engineering, manufacturing and construction

(17.1%). By share of subject areas in *mobility for studies* in 2011-12 engineering, manufacturing and construction represent 15.06% and by share of subject areas in *mobility for work placements* represent 17.1% [2].

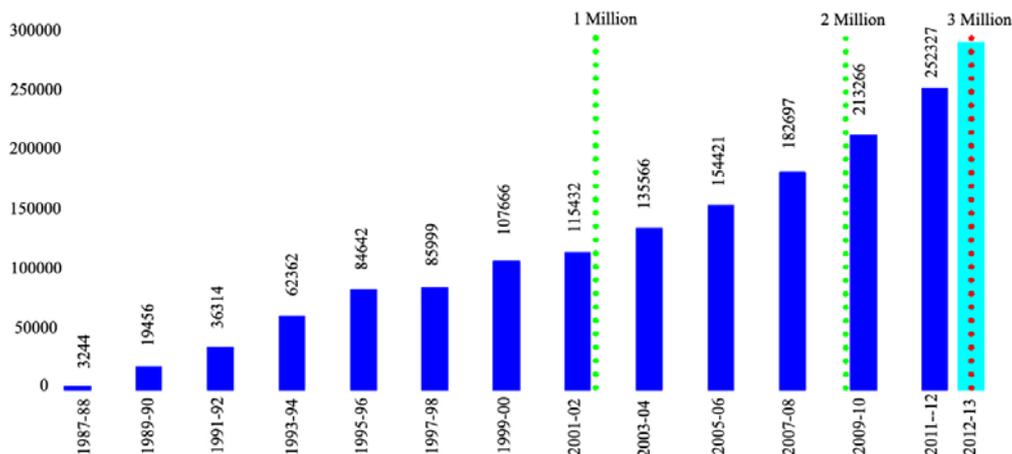


Figure 1: Growth of Erasmus students mobility.

Table 1: Erasmus student mobility in figures [2].

		Type of student mobility	Total
	Studies	Work placements (traineeships)	Student mobility
Total number of Erasmus students	204,744	48,083	252,827
Average EU monthly grant (EUR)	234	361	252
Average duration (months)	6.3	4.3	5.9
Top sending countries (% share of the student population)	LU, LI, ES, CZ, PT	LV, LI, MT, EE, LT	LU, LI, ES, LV, LT
Level of studies (% share)	Bachelor 70% Master 28% Doctorate 1% Short-cycle 1%	Bachelor 57% Master 29% Doctorate 3% Short-cycle 11%	Bachelor 68% Master 28% Doctorate 1% Short-cycle 3%
Number of HEI sending students in 2011-12	2,283	2,574	3,189

Erasmus staff mobility for staff training offers an opportunity to undertake training for a period of between one week (five working days) and six weeks in a company, such as a HEI in another participating country. Staff mobility for training continues to increase in popularity. Out of the 46,527 staff exchanges, 13,204 were staff training periods in 2011-12. The most popular destinations for staff training were Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy and France.

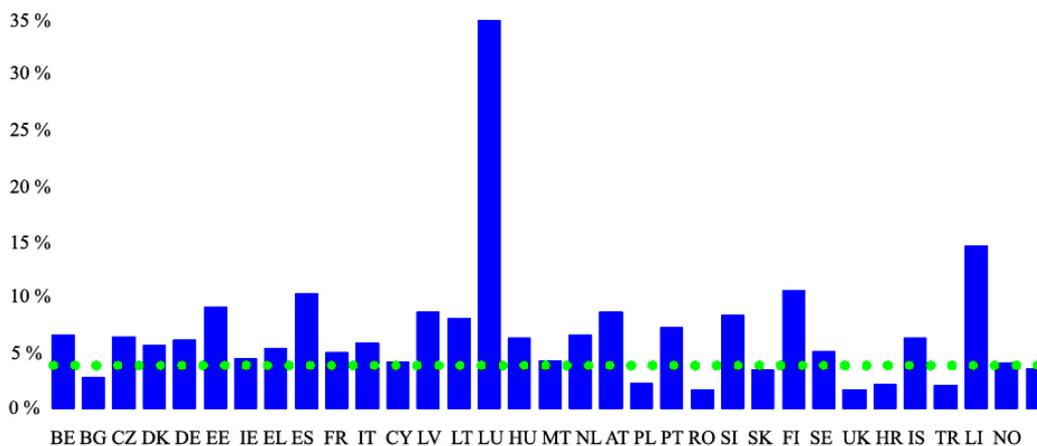


Figure 2. Erasmus students as proportion of graduates in 2011 (average - 4.7 %) [2].

Together with mobility, the Erasmus Programme also fosters the modernisation of European higher education through funding joint projects. Multilateral projects support the modernisation of higher education, cooperation between HEIs and enterprises, promoting virtual campuses and the removal of barriers to mobility, fostering excellence and innovation

in higher education and social inclusion in higher education. The new EU programme *Erasmus+*, which will be launched in 2014, merges the initiatives and needs of bottom-up institutional players with top-down pan-European policies. The new EU programme has a great potential to become a framework providing universities with financial and structural opportunities to change and renew the profile of international activities, and to implement the new internationalisation approaches described in different theories.

The *Erasmus+* programme is analysed as an emerging platform to boost the European higher education visibility in the global arena, to respond to the contemporary needs of European universities, and improve the internationalisation practices of European HEIs, particularly, by strengthening the ties with non-European institutions and global multilateral partnerships. The Bologna goal is that by 2020, at least 20% of all graduates from the EHEA should have spent a period of time studying or training abroad [3][4]. In most countries the number of mobile students is still below 5%.

There is an increased concern about the focus on numbers and percentages, which moves away from the need to concentrate on the content and the quality of the international experience (Figure 3). It also offers the opportunity for student placements in enterprises, university staff teaching and training, and it funds co-operation projects between higher education institutions across Europe. Internationalisation and efficient financing of higher education, encouraging leadership in education and inclusive vocational training, as well as discussion on open educational resources and digital learning, are the key priorities of Lithuania in the field of education and training.

Lithuania and other Central and Eastern European countries are prospective beneficiaries of the new opportunities. The national Programme for Promotion of the International Dimension in Higher Education in Lithuania was recently approved, where the development and delivery of joint study programmes is deemed to be one of the strategic tenets for internationalisation.

Several new national initiatives have been launched: a new support scheme for foreigners admitted to full-time second-cycle study programmes at Lithuanian HEIs, a guest lecturer programme, a national programme to establish joint faculties with international partners, etc. However, substantial mobility flows can be a challenge for those educational systems that receive substantial inflows of students, or result in brain drain from countries, where talented young people choose to study and afterwards live abroad. Lithuania is among such countries.

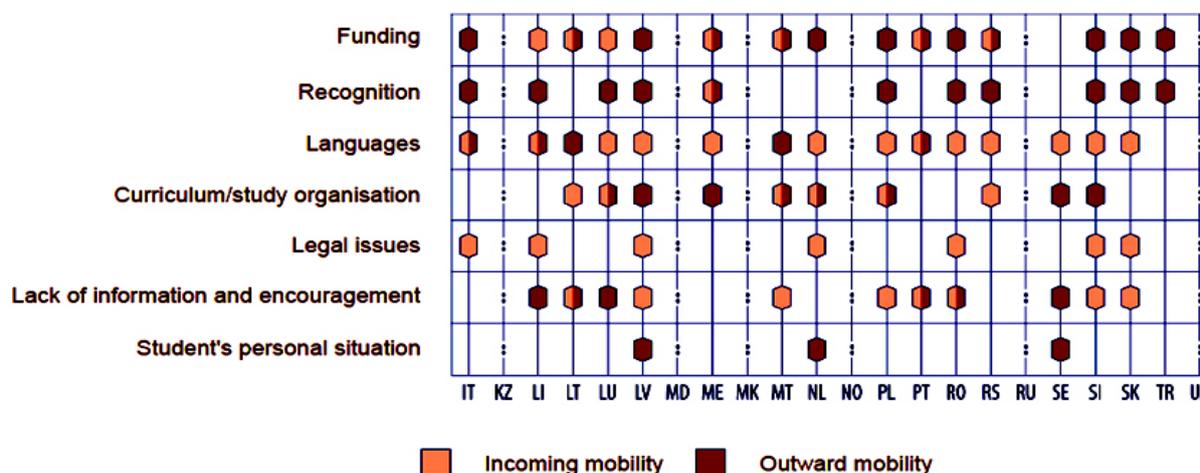


Figure 3: Obstacles of mobility in EU countries, 2010-2011.

#### RISKS AND BENEFITS OF CROSS-BORDER HIGHER EDUCATION AND MOBILITY

For the last five years, the priorities of HEIs' international activities have been rapidly changing in terms of content and geographic directions: the activity spectrum is changing and new forms of activities emerge; universities are searching for new internationalisation tools to implement those activities more effectively in terms of finance and time. A recent study has shown that cross-border higher education affects only a small minority of students within the EU. There are the following benefits and risks:

- Danger of brain drain to the programmes' exporting countries;
- Tuition-based cross-border delivery of higher education disadvantages students from lower socio-economic backgrounds because they are outside the student support system;
- Cross-border programmes are often of lower quality;
- Cross-border programmes have no internal quality assurance mechanisms in place;

- Danger of allowing students to purchase an academic qualification without the same quality assurance that applies to domestic providers of higher education;
- Cross-border provision of higher education has adverse effects on the domestic higher education system;
- Cross-border provision of higher education compromises national autonomy.

In Lithuania, as in Bulgaria and Poland, there are low levels of cross-border higher education activity. Therefore, Lithuania stresses the need for better quality and efficiency in education and training. Even the largest and financially stronger institutions are facing obstacles to ensure quality and efficiency with their own resources. Therefore, a pan-European support system is crucial for both the small and large, state and private universities.

## THE INTERNATIONALISATION IN ENGINEERING HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

As mentioned earlier, the Programme for Promotion of the International Dimension in Higher Education in Lithuania was recently approved, in which the development and delivery of joint study programmes is deemed to be one of the strategic tenets for internationalisation. Lithuanian educational institutions participate in most EU educational programmes, i.e. Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, Grundtvig, Transversal programme, Jean Monnet programme, Euroguidance (vocational guidance), Europass (common tools in Europe to present skills and qualifications), Erasmus Mundus (joint Master's degree and mobility), Tempus (educational reform development in the partner countries), Bologna Process (information about the common education area in Europe), academic exchanges (state scholarships for students and researchers based on bilateral agreements), and NordPlus: Nordplus Junior, Nordplus Adult, Nordplus Higher Education, Nordplus Horizontal. More than 3,000 foreign students have chosen Lithuania for studies since 2000 [5]. Currently, there are about 150,000 students in Lithuania (with a total country population of about 3,000,000).

The Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes (both EU educational initiatives) provided one of the first opportunities for Lithuanian teachers and students to join European co-operative projects and participate in international mobility actions. This opportunity was accepted with great enthusiasm. The greatest numbers of incoming students come from neighbouring countries (Latvia, Russia, Belarus and Poland) and Asian and Middle Eastern countries (Lebanon, Israel, Pakistan, China, Turkey, Jordan, etc).

Vilnius *Gediminas* Technical University (VGTU) in Lithuania is aiming to position itself as an attractive and active partner and fair competitor. In accordance with the European Commission data for Erasmus programme of 2010-2011, VGTU takes 69 places for outgoing students and 24 places for departing employees (Table 2).

Table 2: Top five Lithuanian HEIs sending staff and students 2011-12.

Sending staff	Number	Sending students	Number
Vilnius <i>Gediminas</i> Technical University	156	Vilnius University	589
Vilnius University	129	Vilnius <i>Gediminas</i> Technical University	463
Kaunas University of Technology	108	Mykolas Romeris University	294
Vilnius College	98	Kaunas University of Technology	248
Mykolas Romeris University	86	Vytautas Magnus University	241

The annual increase in the Erasmus student exchange is about 20%. The balance between incoming and outgoing students in VGTU is 1:1.7. At present, the number of outgoing students amounts to 2.4% of all students at VGTU, the total number of incoming students amounts to 1.4% of all VGTU full-time students. According to the results of teaching staff exchange within the Erasmus Programme in the academic year 2004-2005, the University was included into the EC compiled Top 20 List (sharing 12-14th places).

In the academic year 2006-2007, the number of teaching staff visits within the exchange programme reached 13% of the total number of full-time teaching staff. The share of the institution budget intended for the development of internationalisation in 2006 made 3.97% of the total budget. Many studies show that a period spent abroad not only enriches students' lives in the academic and professional fields, but can also improve language learning, intercultural skills, self-reliance and self-awareness. In addition, many employers highly value such a period abroad, which increases the students' employability and job prospects.

## CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions can be drawn:

- A clear positioning of a country and identification of its strengths should be given special consideration. The image of the country, e.g. educational system, study and living standards, and migration policy, have to be emphasised to win the attention of both international partners and prospective international students.

- A national strategy (with major strategic directions, priority activities for higher education internationalisation, national financing, etc.) is needed to support national HEIs in co-operative endeavours and in competitive efforts, taking account of the new European initiatives and aimed at non-EU regions.
- Substantial mobility flows can be a challenge for those education systems that receive substantial inflows of students, or result in brain drain in the countries where talented young people choose to study and afterwards live abroad. Lithuania is among such countries.
- For more intensive mobility flows a substantial variety of courses in English should be offered to possible applicants.

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