

Internationalization at the University of Debrecen

Student mobility as the aim and instrument of internationalization

Ágnes Réka Deákné Dusa

Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Ildikó Szabó, Dr. Ágnes Engler



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The aim of the dissertation and the determination of the topic

The relevance of the internationalization and student mobility in it is given by the dissonance that although student mobility has serious historical antecedents and traditions, the enhanced appearance of foreign students raises new types of questions and problems in public higher education.

According to statistical data, international student mobility is getting more public. Internationalization is getting to appear in the strategy of more and more higher education institutions and learning mobility is becoming accessible for a wider amount of students. However, international and national investigations warn us that new types of inequalities can develop in the knowledge society regarding the individual and institutional level as well. In these, it can be crucial whether the individual has gained special skills and knowledge, relationships which are the specificities of learning abroad. In view of national and international examinations, according to which the social and economic status of the students' family is one of the strongest influential factor regarding (im)mobility, the investigation of socioeconomic status deserves particular attention.

The aim of the thesis was to measure student mobility as a highlighted part of the internationalization of higher education and to take factors supporting and hindering mobility into account in case of students of the University of Debrecen. Therefore, the definition, progress, scene and participant of internationalization are clarified on the basis of Knight's theory as student mobility is embedded in these factors.

In the next theoretical approach, it is outlined why the importance of student mobility in higher education is interesting, what kind of advantages a mobility year or a degree obtained abroad can provide, and what kind of disadvantages can be caused by the absention of mobility. The benefits of experiences abroad can be gained in several forms like the improvement of

foreign language skills, the success and speed of settling into the labour market, the salary or academic achievement. However, student mobility can mean the development of personality as well. Skills and abilities as independence, flexibility, decision-making, conflict management, orientation or cooperation etc. are put at the forefront in more and more researches. The thesis did not have the aim to test the effects correlating with mobility, however, it is significant to realise the stake of student mobility.

This is the way how the third approach of the topic, which examines those factors that support or hinders students learning abroad, is becoming emphatic. International and national researches confirm that although the possibility of student mobility is open to wider and wider social groups, (auto)selecting progress can be demonstrated during the implementation of student mobility. Shouldering studies abroad is influenced by the educational level of the parents and the financial status of the family, even in the developed Western-European countries. Although other researches (like Murphy-Lejeune, Sik) draw attention to the fact that other factors like mobility experience (mobility capital) or international network ('migration shell') have to be taken into regard.

Applied methods

Center for Higher Education Research and Development at the University of Debrecen (CHERD-Hungary) regularly examines the higher education students at the University of Debrecen and in the region of Partium since 2003. Thus, it was possible to compare the main trends of student mobility and the effects of the changes of variables in relation to mobility on the basis of six databases. During the analysis of data, full-time students of the University of Debrecen were in the focus and it was targeted to reach representativeness according to faculty and gender. The first survey of the database in 2003 called "Regional University" contains the answers of 1040 students of Debrecen. In the second

wave of data collection of Regional University project in 2005, students before their graduation meant the target population, containing the answers of 562 students of the University of Debrecen. In 2008 autumn, TERD (Tertiary Education and Regional Development) research provided the possibility to collect the data of 728 bachelor (Ba/BSc) students before their graduation. In 2010 spring, 442 entering so first-year master (Ma/MSc) students were asked. The database of 2012 was created during the HERD (Higher Education for Social Cohesion – Cooperative Research and Development in a Cross-border Area) research in which 1050 participants can be found at the University of Debrecen. Finally, a database created during IESA (Institutional Effects on Students' Achievement in Higher Education) research summarises the answers of 1062 students of the University of Debrecen.

Three main questions were put in the centre during the empirical investigation. Firstly, the changes in the volume of the mobility between 2003 and 2015 were measured from four aspects, namely the changes of the tendencies of the learning experience, learning plan abroad, work experience abroad and employment abroad were compared on the basis of the aim and duration of mobility in the six databases.

Factors influencing the geographical mobility of the students were investigated alongside four dimensions. Gender, parents' educational level, parents' status in the labour market, and objective, subjective and relative financial status of the family was involved in the dimension of social status. The dimension of language competences included the number of language exams and/or spoken languages. Type of settlement, migration capital and 'migration shell' (international network) were defined as part of the dimension of social capital. Finally, soft variables like trust in societal institutions or in fellow human beings, the meaning of life, subjective wellbeing or societal distance were categorised into one dimension which is called trust capital.

Finally, cluster analysis was applied on the IESA 2015 database to categorise responding students into mobility types according to their mobility experiences, plans, language learning motivations and attitudes toward foreign students measured by the social distance scale of Bogardus and to describe them according to the social background characteristics and higher educational achievement.

Results

Mobility tendencies

The four types of mobility movement created on the basis of the aim of the mobility and the dimension of time were measured altogether in our first hypothesis in which we supposed on the basis of the results of international and national mobility statistics that the ratio of the participation of the students of the University of Debrecen in international movement shows a growing tendency in the measured period. Our hypothesis was partly confirmed. An increase could be shown out in learning experiences abroad and plans compared to the data collection of 2003, however, the ratio of past and future student mobility was lower in 2015 compared to the previous inquiries. Examining employment experiences and plans it was confirmed that an increase could be detected from year to year in case of participants from Debrecen. Facilitating to gain work experiences abroad is supportable but long-term aim is the involvement into the ‘circle of brains’ and not the ‘loss of brain’ which means that graduate youth should benefit the gained knowledge and competences of the short-term foreign experiences in the mother country.

Factors influencing students' mobility

Our second hypothesis is aimed to measure whether a connection could be detected between socioeconomic status and mobility experiences and plans. To test the hypothesis, dimension of social status and dimension of language competences was applied.

Regarding the relation of the dimension of social status to the learning mobility experience, it can be stated that the indexes of social status except gender show a positive connection with mobility experience with the aim of learning in different ratios. The connection between the mobility experience with the aim of learning and the status indexes was not significant only in 2005 but the social background of the family showed a positive effect through one or more factors in the other years. The interrelation draws the attention to the correlation with better social status according to international and national experiences as the better social status indexes can the student be described, the higher is the chance of having foreign studies. Regarding language competencies, a strong positive relationship could be detected from year to year.

In case of the effect of social status on learning plans abroad too, a strong connection can be found with the socioeconomic status of the students. However, the effect of social gender disappears; the positive effect of educational level of the parents and the indexes of objective, subjective (and relative) economic capital is demonstrable. Thus the better social status lives the individual in, the higher is chance of planning mobility abroad. Although we cannot inspect that what percentage of the mobility plans marked during the filling of questionnaires have been completed or how many not formerly planned mobility have come into existence, the signs of a self-selection progress can be seen. Students with a more disadvantaged social status seemed not to think about the possibility of learning abroad. Regarding language competences, the fault line is shifting to superlative which means that the essence is not

speaking a foreign language or not but the individual has to speak it in an excellent way (in superlative) to have the courage to start to study abroad. The result corresponds to the results of the national investigation, but it somehow it contradicts to one of the main aims of the mobility programs which would be to support language learning.

The significant association is the least and the most contradictory in case of social status indexes and work experience abroad. In 2010 the children of inactive mothers were more mobile while this could be said in 2012 about the children of fathers with a higher educational level, and in 2015 about the children of families with better objective capital indexes. It seems that students with more advantageous social status could be described as having a more advantageous position regarding mobility experience abroad.

Finally, a strong connection could be detected regarding social status indexes related to employment plans abroad as obviously the students with more advantageous social status usually planned employment abroad until 2008 and after 2012 as well. In 2008 and 2010, the effect of subjective capital indexes was significant instead of objective capital indexes but inversely while students who planned to work abroad were dissatisfied with their financial status. The fact that in the other years, students described with better objective economic capital indexes planned to learn abroad in higher ratio draws the attention to essence that self-selection mechanisms caused by financial status – even if in the level of plans – tends to appear again.

Reviewing the results it can be stated that our second hypothesis according to which mobility experience and plans are influenced by the traditional indexes of socioeconomic status has been confirmed. Thus the children of parents with higher educational qualifications, children of families described with better objective and subjective capital indexes and students who speak foreign languages, especially when they speak more ones and at a higher level have learning and employment mobility experience in a higher ratio.

Besides the traditional factors belonging to social status, the effect of other softer factors can be strong as well according to our third hypothesis. Social capital and trust capital were categorised into this topic. The two dimensions were also tested in all the four cases, namely in case of learning experience abroad, learning plans abroad, employment experience abroad and employment plans abroad.

The relation of social capital to learning experience has a positive direction thus the more foreign acquaintance and the weaker local binding can the student be described with, the more likely is that it learnt abroad. Regarding the dimension of trust capital, connection could be detected only in 2015 while those students learnt abroad in higher ratios that were quite distrustful to their peers. Unfortunately, the cause-effect relation is not known. It is not clear whether bad experiences cause the distrust of mobile students or their mobility arises from their distrust.

The indexes of the dimension of social capital show a positive connection with learning plans abroad as students who live in bigger settlements, have higher mobility capital and more foreign relationships plan more likely foreign learnings. According to the dimension of trust capital, students who plan to learn in another country usually trust in foreign social institutions (EU) but are distrustful of domestic social institutions and peers. The migration potential theory also emphasises the effect of trust and dissatisfaction in mobility plans.

The connection could be detected between employment experience and soft variables in less case and it was not obviously positive. Experiences abroad and bigger type of settlement increase the chance of foreign employment, however, beside the mobility strengthening effect of bigger settlements the effect of small settlements can be seen as well in 2015. It is possible that students living in small settlements think that if they have to travel because of work than it is better to select a bigger travel abroad. Employment experience abroad did not show a connection with trust capital in any years.

Turning to future-oriented mobility, dimension of social capital showed a very strong connection with employment plans abroad and a positive relation was drawn in every year with the usage of different measurements as well. According to this, students who can be characterised with weak local binding but strong mobility capital and who have a lot of foreign relationships plan employment abroad more likely. However, regarding trust capital, students who trust in social institutions or in peers less are less mobile.

Thus our third hypothesis was confirmed as soft variables as mobility capital or ‘migration shell’ are able not only to precise the results given by socio-economic status indexes but to show a more determined association with mobility from year to year. Accordingly, students owning higher social capital (high ‘migration shell’ and mobility capital and lower local binding) can be characterised with higher mobility experience and plans.

Mobility groups

According to our fourth hypothesis, typical student groups were drawn alongside the realised and planned mobility and these are different in regard of economic-social indexes and higher educational achievement indexes. To test the hypothesis, four mobility clusters were created which were named as individuals remaining at home, existential emigrants, explorers and conquerors.

The group of *individuals remaining at home* can be described with entire immobility as they have neither learning-oriented nor employment-oriented foreign experience and they don’t want to try these in the future. This can be seen in their attitudes toward language learning as it is less determined by the recognition of another culture than more by practical aspects. They keep a bigger social distance with exchange students learning in Debrecen. In the group of *existential emigrants*, the huge part of the students had learned abroad before the examination. Maybe this interprets the fact that they mainly intend to go

abroad because of employment. They are the most open-minded toward foreign students and the recognition of the culture dominates in their language learning. The student group called *explorers* don't have mobility experience but they desire for it and would like to learn abroad. Maybe the few international experience causes that they are distant with exchange students and their language learning is regulated by practical aspects. Finally, the *conquerors* are those who are the most mobile regarding their previous experiences and future plans as well. They are open-minded toward foreign students learning in Debrecen and the culture-centred language learning is typical for them.

Measuring the clusters, our hypothesis, according to which the four mobility groups own a peculiar identity regarding social background variables and higher educational achievement indexes, was confirmed. Investigating mobility groups, it can be seen that individuals remaining at home are more likely students living in small towns with a poorer financial background who are children of mothers with lower educational level and they don't speak foreign languages. Most of the explorers are students living in big cities with outstanding subjective financial status who speak a foreign language at intermediate level and their fathers are well educated. Half of the group of conquerors and existential emigrants come from big cities, furthermore, the members of the former group can be described with the most advantageous financial status, they have advanced level language exams in the highest ratio and they speak the most foreign language.

The reason for our decision of examining the indexes of higher education achievement was to identify the more subtle differences between the four mobility clusters as well. In this view, conquerors are obviously the most outstanding. They are those who reached positive results regarding academic achievement, further education plans, intragenerational embeddedness inside the university, volunteering, or membership of an organisation. In contrast, individuals remaining at home seem to be passive not only regarding mobility

but they don't plan further education, have weaker intragenerational relationships, and do voluntary work and are members of any kind of organisation in the smallest ratio. This confirmed our fifth hypothesis according to which students who are immobile and obviously do not have mobility intention can be described with a homogeneous social background pattern. They have a more unfavourable socioeconomic background, their social status is lower; furthermore, they have a more disadvantageous situation regarding higher educational achievement as well.

The fact that the six examined database provided a cross-sectional image could be detected as the limits of empirical investigation thus there were no possibilities to follow-up studies. The six examinations investigated similar topics thus we were able to analyse the four phenomena of mobility (learning and employment experience and plan). However, the comparison was made difficult by the small alterations of the precise questions concerning the dimensions of mobility and background variables, orientating to the changes of the society on the one hand but to the main focus of the given research on the other hand.

Taking into regard the limitations mentioned above, deductions can be made from the data that the mobility of the students of the University of Debrecen can be described both with social background variables and with the softer background variables (as migration shell or mobility capital) which are having a bigger attention in migration researches. The ensemble investigation of the two aspects is definitely necessary because they seem to correlate as immobile students are in a more disadvantaged situation regarding both aspects. In addition, it seems that these students not only stay at home but they lag behind in many aspects regarding higher educational achievement and they are left out of student (and intellectual) socialisation. Of course, it cannot be stated that their involvement into mobility would improve their higher educational achievement and thus their greater participation in campus life would not

necessarily cause the increase of their mobility plans. Anyway, it is important to pay attention to this student group.

Consequently, we consider it important to emphasise the case of students who abstain from mobility when appointing further orientations of researches. It would be worth investigating this group of students more thoroughly and particularly and solve the individual, institutional, higher educational political and social reasons behind immobility and clearing up what can support their participation in mobility – even in short-term or group – programs.



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