

International Degree Mobility: Imbalances and their determinants

International student mobility has been a priority of the European Higher Education Policy Agenda for the last decades with key actions including the promotion of the internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions, the inclusion of underrepresented groups in mobility and (along with this) the removal of obstacles to mobility (e.g. European Commission 2011, BFUG 2012). Despite the efforts towards the advancement of mobility as such, research shows that student mobility still is highly imbalanced, also (or better especially) when looking at the countries of destination. This is also addressed in the Mobility Strategy 2020 for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) which demands more balanced mobility flows by pointing out that “it [degree mobility] can have a sustained effect on the host and home countries, can facilitate capacity building and cooperation and may lead to brain gain on the one side and to brain drain on the other” (EHEA Ministerial Conference in Bucharest 2012).

Imbalances regarding the mobility flows exist for both credit (aims at the acquisition of credits in a foreign institution) and degree mobility (aims at the acquisition of a whole degree in a foreign institution). The latter is substantially less in the focus of recent research studies, while at the same time of more importance when looking at (more permanent) migratory movements, the costs of higher education for countries and phenomena of brain drain and brain gain. Imbalances in mobility flows can become an issue on the one hand for the sending country, if graduates are disproportionately leaving their home country without returning, but also for the respective country of destination, if students stay only for their studies, but are not available for the national labour market after graduation, since they moved to another country.

The proposed paper looks at the imbalances in degree mobility and their determinants (at macro level) and is based on a research project on student mobility in the EHEA based on UNESCO data from 2010 (Grabher et al. 2014). It proves to be a necessary follow-up of the previous project, taking into account changes in mobility patterns due to the financial crisis and deriving developments, which were merely visible in the analysis of the data from 2010. On the other hand the proposed research also takes the analysis a step further and instead of only *describing* the imbalances, it focuses also on the *explanation* of the imbalances in mobility in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by taking a closer look at the underlying factors. With this in mind the central question guiding this research is: What factors at macro level influence patterns and imbalances of international student degree mobility in the EHEA?

The analyses primarily are based on UNESCO data on international student mobility in tertiary education. In a first step, the identification of mobility flow patterns in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) takes place by looking at absolute imbalances between its member states as well as relative imbalances (which takes into account the size of the respective student population). This approach will (a) give a broad overview of mobility patterns in Europe and (b) will allow us to identify potential changes in those patterns by comparing the findings to similar analyses carried out with UNESCO data from 2010.

For identifying the underlying factors (c) that lead to those imbalances, the paper takes into account various push and pull factors at macro-level in order to explain why mobile students choose one country over another for their degree programme (taking into account the size of the mobile student population of a respective sending country and size of the student population of the country of destination).

The selection of explanatory factors which are included in the analysis is based on previous research on student mobility as well as general migration theories (adapted to student mobility movements). On the one hand the bi- and multivariate analyses consider characteristics and differences of higher education systems, like study costs, access regulations, reputation of higher education institutions as well as study language. On the other hand, various macro level factors (retrieved from EUROSTAT, UNESCO, OECD, EUROSTUDENT), such as differences in GDP per capita, migration rates in general, unemployment rates (including youth unemployment and graduate unemployment) and cost of living are tested for their explanatory impact in general as well as for a selection of countries. We are aware that this model is neglecting various factors at micro level, but due to the lack of comparable micro-level data, the choice of explanatory factors is limited to macro level. A multi-level approach which takes into account the personal situation of mobile students would be a very valuable addition to the proposed research project.

To sum up, the proposed paper identifies (a) student mobility flow patterns and imbalances in the European higher education area, including (b) changes of these patterns in the course of the last years, and (c) takes a closer look at the reasons for imbalances. Thus, it contributes to a broader understanding of imbalances and underrepresentation in student mobility which is a European policy priority as well as of high importance for higher education research.