International Student Mobility – Poland in Comparison with Selected European Union Countries

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Abstract: The paper aimed to diagnose Poland’s position in terms of students’ mobility abroad compared with selected European Union countries and to identify the opinions of students from Polish public universities of economics on the benefits and barriers of international exchange. The research used a multimethod approach (desk research method and survey method), with data triangulation (secondary data - UNESCO statistical data and primary data, obtained in surveys). The research shows that Poland has the lowest outbound mobility rate and the most significant imbalance between incoming and outgoing exchange students of all the countries surveyed. The top three benefits of international exchange include improved language skills, getting to know another culture and the opportunity to find out if a student wants to live and work abroad. The authors found the main barrier to be the cost of studying abroad.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a result of progressing globalization processes, mobility and working at the crossroads of various cultures have become a distinctive feature of current times. More and more often, employers require from university graduates not only knowledge of foreign languages and international experience, but additionally intercultural competence, defined as the ability to interact effectively in intercultural situations based on intercultural attitudes, knowledge, awareness and skills (Deardorff, 2009). Universities are meeting these demands by helping students find their way in an increasingly interdependent world as part of the internationalization of education (Francis, 1993), positively influencing their ethical commitment by facilitating the identification of their own beliefs and developing a sense of responsibility and civic engagement (Kreber, 2009). One aspect of the internationalization of universities is student mobility.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Research shows that participation in international exchange programmes prepares students to work effectively in a culturally diverse environment (Azevedo, 2018), and gives them the opportunity for holistic development by exposing them to the challenges of living and working in a foreign environment (Leung et al., 2008), increases their competitiveness in the labour market (Mammadov et al., 2019), as well as the likelihood of increased mobility in their future working life (Wolféil, 2009). The students surveyed most often indicate such benefits of mobility as learning a foreign language, personal development, the opportunity to get to know another culture, strengthening and building an international network, the opportunity to see if one wants to live and work abroad, the opportunity to mark on one’s CV the fact of having spent a semester at a foreign university, as well as gaining knowledge and skills that the home university cannot offer (Berg, 2016) (Doyle et al., 2010) (Németh et al., 2020) (Prasilova et al., 2018) (Marcinik & Winnicki, 2019) (Kim & Sondhi, 2015).

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The most commonly cited barriers include the cost of studying abroad, having to leave friends and family, lack of language skills, lack of knowledge about exchange programmes, extended study periods, inflexibility of the study programme or uncertainty about the ability to cope with the new environment (Doyle et al., 2010) (Nowakowska & Skrzypek-Czerko, 2016) (Liu, 2018). Most international students choose English-speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. The main source market for foreign students is China. India comes in second place. An analysis of global student mobility trends shows growing interest in foreign universities by students from Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Currently, the number of students from these countries is around 0.065 million. It is projected to increase to over 2 million by 2030 (Laad & Sharma, 2021).

Over the last two decades, Polish HEIs have made significant progress in internationalizing their activities. Poland joined the Erasmus programme (then known as Socrates) in 1998. As a result, Polish students have had the opportunity to develop and study at foreign universities across Europe for over 22 years. The following critical events favouring mobility were Poland’s signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 and accession to the European Union in 2004. Today, promoting the internationalization of universities, including international student mobility, is high on the Polish political agenda and receives unanimous support from all government institutions (Bryła & Ciabiada, 2014). The fastest-growing aspect of internationalization is the short-term mobility of staff and students and the slowest - publishing indexed in international databases (ECORYS Sp. z o.o., 2020). In Poland, as in other Central and Eastern European countries (Nowakowska & Skrzypek-Czerko, 2016), integrating international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students in national learning environments has not been a priority so far.

The main purpose of the article was to diagnose Poland’s position in terms of students’ mobility abroad in comparison with selected European Union countries and to identify the opinions of students at Polish public universities of economics on the benefits and barriers to international exchange. The choice of business schools was not accidental. Business universities have a responsibility to educate deeply ethical and entrepreneurial leaders who think globally and understand the systemic implications of business decisions (Business Education Jam, 2015). They are expected to prepare the leaders of ‘tomorrow’, equipped with the skills needed to run a productive, inclusive and sustainable economy in the 21st century (Pitt-Watson, David; Quigley, 2019), able to manage people, finances and resources effectively (CABS Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021), conduct research that addresses social and environmental challenges, such as those related to climate change and social inclusion.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study consisted of two parts. In the first one - using the desk research method - statistical data of UNESCO organizations on student mobility indicators of selected European Union (EU) countries, including Poland, were analysed. The data covered the period 2017-2019. Nine countries that, like Poland, joined the EU in 2004, i.e., Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Malta, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovenia, and Slovakia, were selected for comparative analysis. The second part of the research consisted in conducting a CAWI-type survey from October to December 2020. The respondents were second-year full-time students, with both first
and second degrees in two majors: Management and International Economic Relations.\(^4\) No incentive was offered to participate in the survey. Before collecting the data, the rectors of all five public economics universities in Poland, i.e., Wroclaw, Warsaw, Krakow, Poznan and Katowice, had given their consent to the research by e-mail. The questionnaires were sent by internal mail to all the researched years and faculties. Finally, we selected 155 out of 202 completed questionnaires for analysis. Eighty-five questionnaires from Wroclaw University of Economics, 35 from Poznan University of Economics and 35 from Krakow University of Economics were analysed. The decision was made to reject questionnaires from the Katowice University of Economics and the Warsaw School of Economics (a total of 15 questionnaires) - because of a too-small number. Another 32 questionnaires were omitted due to lack of data or biased filling (e.g., the respondent marked the lowest or the highest point of the scale in all his answers). Most respondents were women (65.8%). All persons were of Polish origin.

3.1. Results of the Desk Research

Using the desk research method, statistics from UNESCO organisations were analysed. They show (Figure 1) that in the examined period the number of incoming students has been growing year by year. Poland is an exception in this comparison. In 2017, 63925 students arrived at Polish universities, but in the following years, there were respectively 15% and 14% fewer students compared to 2017. However, it should be noted that Poland is the leader when it comes to the number of incoming students. In second place is the Czech Republic and in third place is Hungary. The countries with the fewest students arriving in the period under review are Malta, Slovenia, and Estonia.

![Figure 1. Total inbound internationally mobile students, (number) in years 2017-2019](http://data.uis.unesco.org)

Analysis of the data in Figure 2 shows that in 2017-2018, the most significant number of students went to universities abroad from Slovakia. However, it should be noted that in 2019, the number of outgoing students from this country decreased by 30% compared to 2018. Cyprus and Poland followed in terms of the number of outgoing students. The least number of students studying abroad are from Malta, Estonia, and Latvia.

The net flow of students, i.e., the difference between the number of incoming and outgoing students, is shown in Figure 3. Three of the ten countries (i.e., Cyprus, Lithuania, and Slovakia) have a negative net flow in each of the three years under study. This means that more students

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\(^4\) To ensure the comparability of the research sample, faculties which occur at all universities were selected for the study
leave these countries than come to them. Poland is characterized by a decided excess of incoming over outgoing students. The country has the lowest rate of outgoing mobility (percentage of the total number of tertiary students in a given country who participated in foreign exchange programmes). Its value in the surveyed period did not exceed 1.77 (UNESCO).

![Figure 2. Total outbound internationally mobile tertiary students studying abroad, (number) in years 2017-2019](http://data.uis.unesco.org)

Source: own elaboration based on data from the website http://data.uis.unesco.org

![Figure 3. Net flow of internationally mobile students (inbound - outbound) (number) in years 2017-2019](http://data.uis.unesco.org)

Source: own elaboration based on data from the website http://data.uis.unesco.org

### 3.2. Survey Results

The questionnaire survey asked students about the benefits of international exchange. Students rated them on a five-point ordinal scale with response options: definitely not important, not important, hard to say, important, definitely important.

The three most important benefits were improving language skills, learning about a different culture, and seeing if the student wants to live and work abroad. Playing sports, developing cultural interests, and studying the culture or language of one’s family were considered the least important (Figure 4).

The next question concerned the barriers which discourage respondents from participating in international exchange. The research shows (Table 1) that the main obstacle is the cost of studying abroad (72.3%), followed by the need to “make up” curriculum differences when returning home (61.9%) and the need to leave family and friends behind (51%).
4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

It seems that taking into consideration the relevance of the topic of internationalization of HEIs in Central and Eastern Europe, it would be worthwhile to conduct further, more detailed research in this area to develop recommendations on actions to be taken by HEIs not only to increase their recognition in the global market of educational services and attract international students but also to build an attitude of openness to intercultural experiences of their students by encouraging and creating conditions for mobility within various international exchange programmes.
5. **CONCLUSION**

Poland is characterized by the most significant imbalance between incoming and outgoing students among all the countries surveyed. The reason for particular concern about the increase in the number of international students may be that this factor is considered in the algorithms for awarding state subsidies and is one of the evaluation parameters in global university rankings. In Poland, as in other non-English-speaking countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Prasilova et al., 2018) (Németh et al., 2020), among the three most essential benefits associated with international exchange were improved language skills, getting to know another culture and the opportunity to see if the student wants to live and work abroad. Practising sport, developing cultural interests, and studying in the culture or language of one’s family were considered the least important. In English-speaking countries, learning a foreign language is not as important (Doyle et al., 2010). However, the main barrier was found to be the cost of studying abroad.

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