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Student Mobility in Tertiary Education

Studying abroad yields valuable academic and cultural benefits, increases students' employability in the international labour market and, when going to another EU member state, strengthens a European identity. With respect to employability, it was found that mobile students face less unemployment after graduation and have better career prospects as well as higher salaries (European Commission 2014; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Di Pietro 2015). The importance of student mobility was also recognised by EU ministers in 2011, who decided to increase the target figure for the proportion of higher education students completing a study or training period abroad to 20% in the "EU Education and Training 2020 strategy" (European Commission 2017).

In this article we examine the mobility of students from EU countries, which varies strongly between the member states. To this end a mobile student will be defined as someone physically crossing national borders to participate in a study or training activity relevant to tertiary education (Eurostat 2016)². The available data is presented for all EU28 member states, except Cyprus, Malta and Luxembourg, which were excluded due to the very small number of domestic tertiary students (<50,000 in 2015, Eurostat (2017b)).

INWARD MOBILITY

Eurostat (2017a) provides data on the share of mobile students studying in EU countries in a given academic year, as a percentage of the total number of students enrolled in tertiary education in the respective country. The upper graph in Figure 1 shows the share of mobile students at all levels of formal tertiary education, while the lower graph presents the data split by educational level.

The proportion of students that moved to another country for higher education varies greatly across countries and educational levels. While the share is 18.5% of the total student population in the UK for the 2014/15 academic year, only 0.5% of students in Croatia came from abroad. Other countries with shares of mobile students above 10% include Austria, Belgium and the Czech Republic, which are particularly popular

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² The indicators which countries apply to determine a mobile student vary in the available datasets. The country of usual residence is used by Estonia, Ireland, Spain, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia, United Kingdom; country of upper secondary diploma by Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Portugal; the country of citizenship by Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Italy, Hungary; Slovakia and the country of prior education by Denmark, Germany, Lithuania, Latvia, Finland. These country-specific indicators are common to all datasets used in this article.

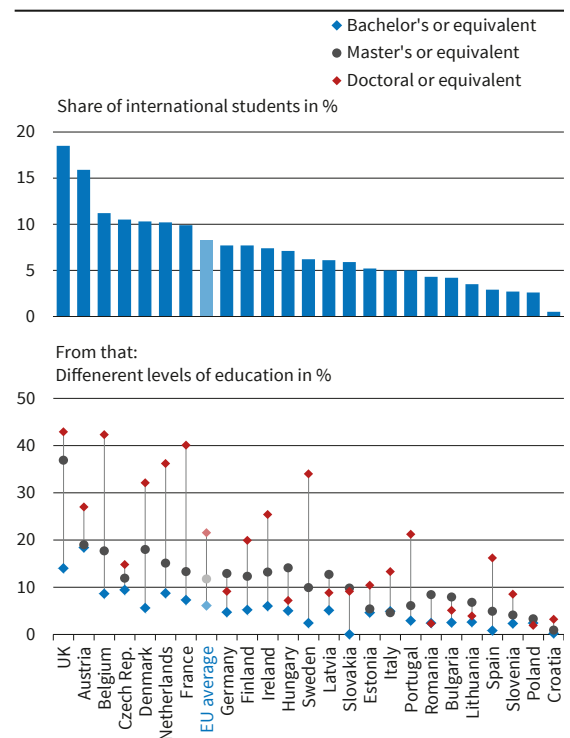
among students from the respective neighbouring countries (Eurostat 2017a). In the UK, on the other hand, the international student body comes from a wide range of countries around the world, which is most likely due to the low language barrier (Eurostat 2017a). At the other end of the scale are the countries that joined the EU most recently, i.e. Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania, each with shares of mobile students below 5%.

When looking at the data divided by educational level, it emerges that for most countries, the share of mobile students increases with the level of education. This may be accounted for by the fact that programmes are often very specialised at the graduate level. Van Bouwel and Veugelers (2013) even found that the lack of opportunities to study specific fields in the home country is the driving factor for graduate students in their decision to migrate. In the UK, Belgium, Netherlands, France, and Sweden more than one third of Doctoral students are mobile and in half of the considered countries, international students make up more than 10% of Master's students. For almost all countries, the share of international students in Master programmes is higher than on the Bachelor level, however, the difference is minor. An exception is the UK, where Master's programmes seem to be particularly attractive for international students, while the share of mobile students at the Bachelor level is similar to that in other countries.

Figure 2 presents the development of student mobility between the academic years 2006/07 and

Figure 1

International Students in Tertiary Education Academic year 2014/15

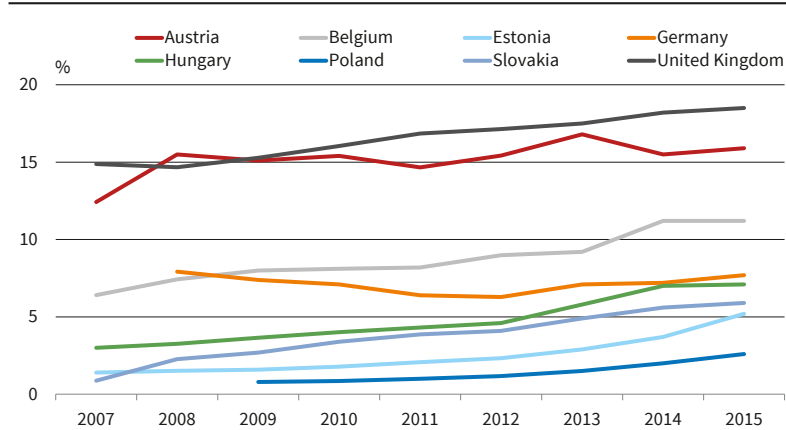


Source: Eurostat (2017a, 2017b); author's calculations.

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Figure 2

Share of International Students in Tertiary Education over Time
Academic years 2006/07–2014/15



Source: OECD (2017a, 2017b), Eurostat (2017a); authors' calculations.

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2014/15 for selected countries. An upward trend in the share of international students is visible over the presented timespan for all countries except Germany. The countries not displayed in the graph follow a similar pattern. Even in Germany, where the share of international students declined, the absolute number of international students increased by nearly 30% between 2008 and 2015 (Eurostat 2017c), and the increase in the total number of students enrolled was slightly greater (Eurostat 2017b). A large increase in the share of international students can particularly be noted for the countries in the sample which only joined the EU in 2004 and started out from a relatively low level, with an increase of 5.0 percentage points in Slovakia and 3.8 percentage points in Estonia.

OUTWARD MOBILITY

Turning to the students leaving their country for tertiary education, the share of mobile students is calculated by dividing the number of mobile students from a country, by the total number of tertiary students from that country of origin. Thereby, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Ireland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia rank highest with over 5% of their native student body studying abroad. However, for about half of the countries in the dataset the share of outgoing students ranges between 2–3%. The EU28 average also lies in this range, with a share of 2.8%.

Comparing Figure 3 to Figure 1, the order of countries is partly reversed. Most strikingly, the UK hosts the largest share of international students, while students originally coming from the UK show the lowest mobility. Furthermore, most countries ranking highest in Figure 3, host a low share of international students themselves, like Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Romania. These contrary observations for the two different student mobility indicators within countries are probably due to the fact, that the university quality

(measured by rankings), cost of living, language and climate are, among other factors, significant determinants of student destinations (González et al. 2011).

Countries that are particularly attractive are likely to have a high share of international students, because their students want to stay and are therefore much less mobile.

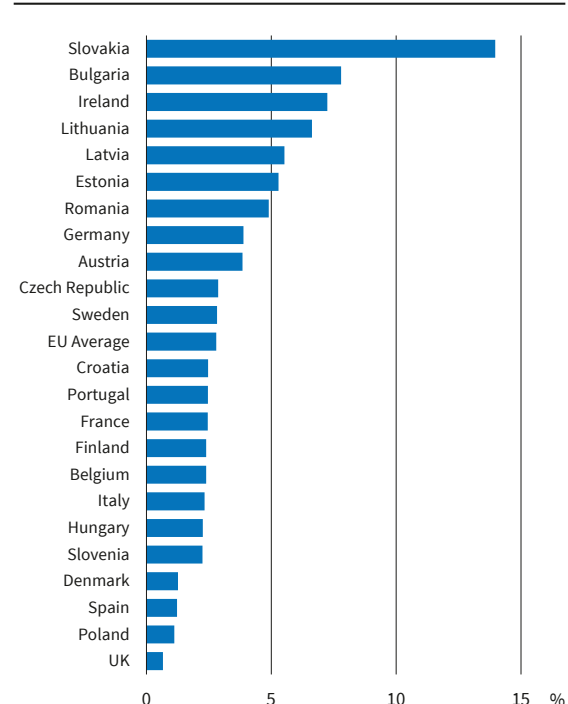
DETERMINANTS OF STUDENT MOBILITY

As quality of education is a key factor determining the destination countries for mobile students, public expenditure on tertiary education is likely to influence the share of incoming international students. Figure 4 shows the share of international students in a country and its average government expenditure (current, capital, and transfers) for tertiary education, measured as the expenditure per student as a percentage of the GDP per capita, which are indeed positively correlated.

In the graph, the countries fall into three groups. The largest group has a share of international students between about 1–6% and a public expenditure for tertiary education of about 20–30% of GDP per capita. The

Figure 3

Share of Students Studying Outside the Country
Academic Year 2012/13



Source: European Commission (2015).

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Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) as well as Germany and France attract a larger share of mobile students and have higher government expenditures for tertiary education of over 35% of their GDP per capita. A similarly high level of government expenditure but a much higher share of mobile students can be observed for the United Kingdom and Austria. For the latter two countries the language is another key reason for the high level of mobile students; with English speaking students from around the world coming to the UK, and Austria attracting many students from Germany.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the inward and outward mobility of students greatly differs across countries and educational levels. This can be accounted for by the variation in the quality level of universities, language factors and the availability of opportunities on the Master’s and Doctoral level.

With the data available one cannot appropriately judge the current situation of student mobility with respect to the aim of a proportion of 20% of higher education students from EU countries completing a study or training period abroad. The collection of the necessary data has just begun and first estimates will be available in 2018 (European Commission 2015).

In view of the data presented in this article, however, it seems like there is still a lot of work to be done, with an EU average of 8.2% for incoming international students and of 2.8% for students leaving their country in a given year. Given the steady increase in student mobility over the period of 2007–15, however, one can assume a similar pattern for the share of students completing tertiary education that spent a study or training period abroad.

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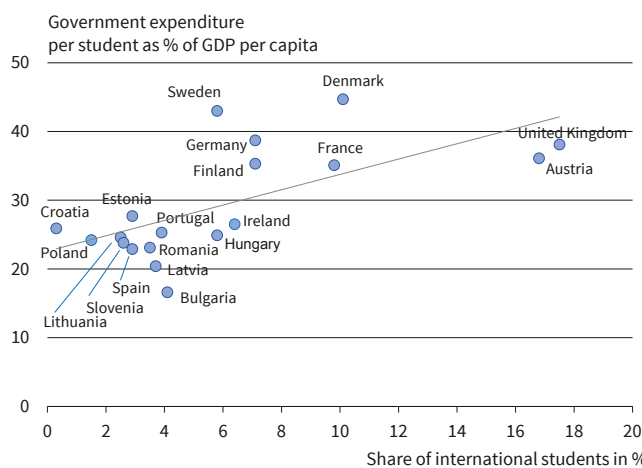
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Figure 4

Government Expenditure per Tertiary Student and the Share of International Students, 2013



Source: Eurostat (2017a); Worldbank (2017).

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