

The Influence of European Student Mobility on Future Migration Intentions

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Background

Even though mobile students only represent a minority of the total student population today, student mobility can be considered as an integral part of the "new map of European migration" (King 2002); a new form of migration which is embedded in a "context of transition from the local to the global, and the momentous opening up of spaces for communication, where mobility is conceived as a continuous and multiple process rather than as a one-way ticket" (Murphy-Lejeune 2002, 2). The phenomenon can be seen as a particular form of international migration (Caestecker and Rea 2009; Van Mol 2008), which is motivated by a mix of education/leisure/travel/experience goals, rather than by economic goals (King 2002).

At the institutional level, two rationales underline European exchange programmes; namely an economic and a civic one (Corbett 2003; Papatsiba 2003; 2006). The economic rationale aims to promote the European labour market; former exchange students would move more easily to another Member State in their future career. Several studies already addressed the link between a study period abroad and later migration behaviour (e.g. Bracht et al. 2006; Findlay, King, Stam & Ruiz-Gelices, 2006; Teichler & Janson 2007; Wiers-Jenssen 2008). They all conclude that a stay abroad enhances subsequent migration behaviour. Matthias Parey and Fabian Waldinger (2008) for example demonstrated that studying abroad increases an individual's probability of working in a foreign country by 15 to 20 percentage points. Likewise, Janneke Wiers-Jenssen (2008) showed that former mobile students hold more international jobs compared to their non-mobile peers.

However, all these studies draw on a sample of last-year students, who were assigned to the group of former mobile students or a control group of non-mobile students. In this paper, we demonstrate the studies to overestimate the influence of an exchange programme on future migration behaviour and international job aspirations, since many of the students who participate in an exchange programme already have international aspirations before going abroad.

Research Questions

In this paper, the author focuses on students in all stages of their university career, thereby incorporating a pre-mobility context in the research design. This is important, since it permits us to investigate if students already have international job aspirations before going abroad, and compare these aspirations with those of students who already went abroad. As a result, we can estimate the real influence of a stay abroad on future migration intentions and international job aspirations.

Methods

The results presented in this paper are based on an online quantitative data collection held at the end of the academic year 2008-2009 at 13 European universities in 9 countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and Slovenia), and distributed to students of Social & Political Sciences; Business Studies & Economics; Language Studies; and Engineering. The questionnaire was developed through the adaptation of existing questionnaires on European Student Mobility (e.g. Findlay, King, Stam & Ruiz-Gelices, 2006; King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003), and refined after transcription and analysis of twenty-three explorative in-depth interviews with students (mobile as well as non-mobile) in February-March 2009 at the Universiteit Antwerpen (Belgium) and the Universitat de València (Spain). This resulted in a pilot version of the questionnaire which was tested with students of nineteen European countries in April 2009, distributed on students' internet panels and in groups at social network sites such as Facebook. The design and structure of the survey were treated with care, since various authors suggested that these elements of an online

survey can affect the response rate, the dropout rate, and even the quality of the responses (Couper, Traugott & Lamias, 2001; Fan & Yan 2010; Thorndike et al. 2009; Tourangeau, Couper & Conrad 2004). Additionally, answer categories were randomised where possible to reduce potential response bias. Average completion time of the questionnaire was between five and twenty minutes and participants were free to backtrack and review all responses before submitting the questionnaire.

After completing the data collection, students were grouped into four different groups; (1) mobile students; (2) future mobile students (those students who want definitely to participate in an exchange programme abroad); (3) potential mobile students (those students who still not know if they want to participate in an exchange programme abroad); and (4) non-mobile students. This distinction was important for our further analysis of the data.

Frame

The theoretical framework which underpins this research project was published online in 2009 (Van Mol, 2009). The project departs from the same hypothesis as the previous mentioned studies, namely that student mobility is influencing subsequent migration behaviour. However, research on the pre-mobility phase of university students has so far only been conducted in the context of the United States (e.g. Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen & Pascarella, 2009; Stroud, 2010). In Europe, evidence on pre-mobility migration aspirations of students is lacking. For that reason, our theoretical framework relies mainly on the American literature on students' intentions to study abroad, and the existing literature on migrant personality (e.g. Boneva & Frieze, 2001; Frieze et al., 2004; Frieze, Hansen & Boneva, 2006).

Research findings

Our results provide strong evidence that future mobile students do not differ from mobile students considering their future migration intentions or wish to have an international job. Interestingly, both groups do differ - statistically seen - significantly from the other groups (considering these aspects). This finding is important, since it shows that most of the research results until now - relying mostly on a sample of last-year students - are biased, and hence overestimate the effect of a stay abroad on migration behaviour.