

Student mobility. Between theory and practice

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The Bologna Process has initiated the “culture of reforms” in higher education, conditioning the economic and social development of Europe. Erasmus Plus is an EU programme of education in 2014-2020. Despite the numerous benefits it offers to students, their mobility within the Erasmus Plus Programme proves to be low (not satisfactory).

Purpose: Review the theoretical and practical aspects of student mobility, with particular emphasis on the Erasmus Plus Programme.

Materials and methods: We searched for extant networks through peer-reviewed literature and the world-wide web. Additionally, we used a data analysis on the mobility of students of medicine and health sciences in 2005-2015 within the Erasmus Plus Programme, at selected university in Poland.

Results: According to the educational standards in the European Union, students of medical faculties are obliged to complete 12 semesters of studies

comprising 5,500 hours under teachers’ supervision. In Poland there are 5,700 hours – these additional hours account for mandatory physical education and foreign language classes which are not taught in other countries. Data from the last decade indicate that student mobility in Poland is an overestimated phenomenon as it concerns a narrow circle of students.

Conclusions: A student who benefits from a scholarship under the Erasmus Plus Programme enhances their self-esteem and development opportunities. Participation in an international programme seems to bring benefits alone. In practice, however, there prove to be numerous barriers related to student mobility, such as financial problems, language barriers and issues related to the recognition (crediting) of a period of study completed at a partner university.

Key words: Bologna Process, Erasmus, student mobility

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INTRODUCTION

An academy is the greatest achievement of civilization which permeates and affects all the spheres of life, providing support to thousands of individuals who devote their creative invention, energy and time to something so difficult to define clearly as the intellectual progress of humanity. The violent economic, political and social changes currently taking place the world over relate to the field of education too.

The tertiary education system, especially its bastion, the university, understood as an idea, community and institution at the same time, has always been closely intertwined with the social context [1]. Its role is not only to broaden the cognition aimed at achieving the successive levels of broadly understood progress but also to form specific cultural patterns and to respond to social needs. Therefore, the influence of university centres had to be transformed as a result of the changes taking place in modern society.

The former academic systems in most European countries, according to the tradition of the Humboldt university popularized at the end of the 19th century, were based on independence in the areas of research and teaching. The essence of their existence was the search for the truth and learning the skills of rational and critical thinking through, inter alia, partnership relations between professors and students [2].

Humboldt's concept of the freedom and specific solitude or autonomy of universities, which had previously given direction to the functioning of these institutions, was distant from reality and did not constitute the driving force of the current economic systems. Higher education institutions were confronted with the necessity of introducing reforms taking into account such challenges as: the dissemination of knowledge centres due to the growing demand for academic education, the development of co-operation with the industry and the internationalization of education and scientific research [3].

The Bologna Declaration of 19.06.1999 has launched the process of reforms in Europe, the so-called Bologna Process. It is regarded as a particular reflection of the global social changes; the cycle of the reforms suggested should fulfil the requirements of the modern personality of the modern human whose awareness is shaped under their influence. The goals of this process include popularizing mobility among students, introducing legible and comparable scientific degrees of academic teachers and research workers, and assuring a high quality of education [4].

The Bologna Process is assigned the following educational objectives: preparing learners for the labour market, preparing them for being active citizens of a democratic society, personal development of learners, the advancement and

support of the foundations of advanced knowledge (knowledge-based society and economy) [5].

Thus formulated objectives define the strategy and direction of action along with the tasks facing the organizers of academic education. The most important of them are thought to be: the adjustment of each country's education to the requirements of the European Union labour market, the development of attitudes favourable to the formation of the community of Europeans, the improvement of the attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education in the world (through curricular and institutional diversity), the comparability of qualifications and diplomas, and educational quality assurance at higher education institutions [6].

The Bologna Process has undoubtedly initiated the "culture of reforms" in higher education, conditioning the economic and social development of Europe. Regular implementation of the tools of this reform definitely contributes to cultural changes allowing young people to adapt to the labour market requirements and to the processes related to globalization and geopolitics, and it increasingly satisfies the educational aspirations of societies [7].

The European Union presently faces a time of profound transformations, largely resulting from globalization and the ageing of the population. In addition, the financial problems emerging in different European countries, frequently taking the form of a collapse of the national economy, undermine the social and economic progress made by the EU member states. Hence new initiatives and strategies are proposed to oppose these disturbing trends. One example is the "Europe 2020" concept, whose objective is to sustain the growth of employment rate, efficiency and social cohesion in Europe. One of the central initiatives of the above-named concept is the agenda for new skills and jobs, whose guiding idea is improving and matching employees' qualifications to the needs of employers and the labour market, today and in future.

Erasmus Plus is an EU programme for education in 2014-2020, considered to be consistent with the "Europe 2020" strategy. Among other things, the program broadens the opportunities of co-operation and mobility for the partner countries in the area of higher education. "Mobility" in the Erasmus Plus Programme comprises the following categories of actions:

- student exchange – students travelling for a study period (SMS - *Student Mobility - Studies*) between 3 and 12 months in the same academic year, students travelling for traineeships in co-operating institutions, companies and organizations in European countries (SMP - *Student Mobility - Placements*) – between 3

and 12 months in the same academic year, joint master's degrees (Erasmus Mundus);

- academic staff exchange—academic teachers travelling to conduct classes at partner higher education institutions abroad (STA - *Staff Teaching Assignments*), academic staff (both academic teachers and other employees) travelling to partner higher education institutions and other co-operating institutions, organizations and enterprises for training purposes (improvement of professional qualifications, broadening the knowledge of a particular field, attending training courses, "work shadowing", etc.) (STT - *Staff Training*);
- the Jean Monnet Activities aimed at fostering teaching, research and discussions in the field of European Union studies worldwide;
- supporting political dialogue through a network of experts on the higher education reform in the partner neighbouring countries of the EU [8].

The internationalization of the academic education process is another initiative incorporated in the "Europe 2020" concept. European higher education institutions are active participants in international exchange programs.

The Dutch government studies from 2012 demonstrated that if only 2.5% of foreign graduates stayed to work in a given country, this would have long-lasting effects on public finance, bringing a return exceeding the investment made in the undertaking [9].

States of a good economic status follow a strategy aimed at acquiring foreign students, hoping to obtain distant, multidimensional profits. This applies to specific fields of study such as medicine, nursing, medical rescue or physical therapy. In most European countries there is a great demand for graduates in the above fields.

The international mobility of students and academic staff alike is one of the priorities of the Bologna Process. It offers possibilities of studying or working in an international environment, broadens the knowledge of a particular discipline in a different educational system, provides opportunities for getting to know new cultures and languages, teaches respect for and understanding of cultural diversity, and builds up the awareness of the international dimension and character of knowledge [10,11].

Considering the undeniable, positive aspects of mobility – both vertical and horizontal, and the internationalization of higher education institutions, the discourse on these issues should, instead of concentrating on the question whether to use international scholarships, focus on pinpointing the reasons for such a low interest in this idea

among Polish students and on the potential elimination of obstacles.

Financial issues present the most important limitation to Polish students. Participation in a foreign scholarship, due to the remarkably higher costs of living abroad, is usually conditional upon the parents' income.

Another significant issue among Polish students is the language barrier. As regards their language skills young Poles unfortunately fall behind other EU countries. A Polish high school graduate should be expected to have a good command of a foreign language, e.g. English, and at most to maintain or improve their professional language skills in the course of studies, instead of having to learn a language from scratch, as is often the case [12].

Another major obstacle are formal considerations, for examples difficulties with obtaining the approval of the *learning agreement*, i.e. an agreement on the study programme from partner institutions. The document must be officially approved by the university authorities as well as the Faculty Coordinator. The problem lies in the fact that the courses offered abroad usually are not called the same as at the sending institution, and the educational outcomes assigned to particular courses/modules are different too. A good solution to this problem would certainly be the creation of a so-called mobility window within the study programme, or a semester during which a completely flexible educational path would be in force [13].

The following is a list of subjects realized during the fifth year of medical studies at one of the Medical Universities in Poland, and for comparison, the same variant implemented in Portugal. Due to the review purposes of the work, the statement of subjects in the intention of the authors wasn't dictated by the need for an in-depth quantitative analysis but presenting only the size of the discrepancy. Therefore, the authors decided not to give full names of universities, also because of the autonomy of each university in building programs of study.

In table 1 we present a comparison of courses taught in the 5th year of medical studies in Poland and in Portugal. According to the educational standards in the European Union, students of medical faculties are obliged to complete 12 semesters of studies comprising 5,500 hours under teachers' supervision. In Poland there are 5,700 hours – these additional hours account for mandatory physical education and foreign language classes which are not taught in other countries.

Table 1. Differences in the names of subjects taught in the 5th year of study at the faculty of medicine (Poland vs. Portugal)

| No. | Subject name Faculty of Medicine, One of the Medical Universities in Poland | ECTS credits | No. | Subject name One of the Medical Universities in Portugal | ECTS credits |
|-----------------|---|-----------------|-----------------|--|-----------------|
| 1 | Internal Diseases - Haematology | 3 ECTS | 1 | Molecular Mechanisms of Disease | 3 ECTS |
| 2 | Internal Diseases - Endocrinology | 2 ECTS | 2 | Psychiatry | 12 ECTS |
| 3 | Internal Diseases – Toxicology and Acute Conditions in Internal Diseases | 2 ECTS | 3 | General and Family Medicine | 12 ECTS |
| 4 | Internal Diseases – Cardiology II | 2 ECTS | 4 | Rational Prescription of Medication | 3 ECTS |
| 5 | Infectious Diseases | 4 ECTS | 5 | Paediatrics | 9 ECTS |
| 6 | Lung Diseases and Tuberculosis | 2 ECTS | 6 | Surgical and Medical Specialties III | 15 ECTS |
| 7 | Rheumatology | 2 ECTS | 7 | The Patient with Cancer | 3 ECTS |
| 8 | Paediatrics | 7 ECTS | 8 | Optional | 3 ECTS |
| 9 | Surgery | 5 ECTS | In total | | 60 ECTS |
| 10 | Paediatric Surgery | 2 ECTS | | | |
| 11 | Orthopaedics and Traumatology | 3 ECTS | | | |
| 12 | Gynaecology and Obstetrics I | 5 ECTS | | | |
| 13 | Neurology | 3 ECTS | | | |
| 14 | Psychiatry II | 4 ECTS | | | |
| 15 | Radiology II | 3 ECTS | | | |
| 16 | Clinical Pharmacology | 1 ECTS | | | |
| 17 | Clinical Nutrition | 1 ECTS | | | |
| 18 | Laboratory Diagnostics | 2 ECTS | | | |
| 19 | Optional Courses | 3 ECTS | | | |
| 20 | Vocational Training | 4 ECTS | | | |
| In total | | 60 ECTS | | | |

The following factors are favourable to increasing the number of students enrolling on exchange programs between higher education institutions: study offers in a frequently used European language, e.g. English, programmes of study prepared jointly with partner institutions, exchange of academic teachers, use of ECTS credits, recognition of periods of study abroad, an internal quality assurance system and appropriate, interesting infrastructure [14,15].

The ECTS is a system facilitating the acceptance of a period of study completed by a student at a foreign higher education institution by their alma mater. The ECTS was elaborated in the second half of the 1980s and ever since the system has been adopted by more and more European higher education institutions, while its widest use can be observed at the institutions participating in the student exchange under the Erasmus Plus Programme.

The ECTS is a code of proven solutions concerning the recognition of (a period of) studies. Its foundation is the transparency of the study programme and the principles of awarding credits for courses. The recognition of a period of study is one of the primary conditions of admission to the Erasmus Plus Programme. This means that a period of study completed abroad replaces a comparable period of study at the alma mater, irrespective of the fact that the contents of the agreed study program abroad may differ from the program at the alma mater. The ECTS as such does not regulate the contents since these are issues related to the quality of education that the ECTS does not deal with.

The ECTS ensures the transparency of crediting study periods through:

- the use of ECTS credits assigned to subjects (course cycles); the basis for awarding credits is the workload required from a student to obtain

a credit for a given subject (course cycle); in the ECTS a full academic year corresponds to 60 credits, a semester to 30 credits and a trimester to 20 credits;

- the preparation of a “Catalogue of Subjects” presenting a detailed description of courses offered by a higher education institution for particular fields of study, specifying the number of ECTS credits for each subject (course cycle);
- the application of the Learning Agreement prepared before the start of a student’s period of study abroad, setting out the programme of courses to be followed by the student and the number of ECTS credits to be awarded in their recognition. The agreement is binding upon all the three parties obliged to sign it: the sending institution, the receiving institution and the student (a “Transcript of Records” presenting the student’s previous academic achievements at the sending institution is often required to be attached to this document);
- the use of a Transcript of Records listing all the subjects (course cycles) completed by the student abroad and the number of ECTS credits assigned to them. The Transcript of Records is issued by the receiving institution. The sending institution recognizes the credits obtained by the student at other institutions in such a way that the credits obtained for the subjects (course cycles) passed replace the credits that the student would receive at the sending institution during a comparable period of study [16].

The European Commission report on mobility outcomes for 2013, based on the analysis of such factors as counselling about the discussed issue, providing students with support, including financial aid, foreign language teaching, recognition of study periods abroad and support for students in an unfavourable social situation, clearly indicates that no country complying with the Bologna Process requirement attained good outcomes in all the areas listed above.

Of special note is the fact that little importance was attached to the recognition of study periods abroad: no country was awarded the green colour (the sixth, highest level) in this category. The above-named report reveals that the best outcomes were achieved by Germany, Belgium, Spain, France and Italy. Poland was awarded the yellow colour in all the categories – there are two shades of yellow corresponding to the 3rd and 4th levels on the 6-point scale [17].

For the purposes of this paper, a data analysis of the documentation on the mobility of students of medicine and health sciences in 2005-2014 was conducted. Table 2, 3 and 4 present a quantitative summary concerning students of the Medical Faculty (major: medicine) and the Faculty of Health Sciences (majors: nursing, obstetrics, physical therapy, dietetics, public health and

electroradiology). The presented data from the last decade indicate that student mobility is an overrated phenomenon since it concerns but a narrow circle of students.

Table 2. Numerical data on students coming to study at one of the Medical Universities in Poland and travelling to study abroad in 2005-2014

| One of the Medical Universities in Poland | Number of students leaving under the Erasmus/ Erasmus Plus Programme | Number of guest students under the Erasmus/ Erasmus Plus Programme |
|---|--|--|
| Faculty of Medicine | 436 | 251 |
| Faculty of Health Sciences | 11 | 7 |

Table 3. Numerical data on the mobility of students – one of the Medical Universities in Poland, in 2005-2014

| Year | Faculty of Medicine | Faculty of Health Sciences | Total |
|------|---------------------|----------------------------|-------|
| 2005 | 34 | 0 | 34 |
| 2006 | 41 | 0 | 41 |
| 2007 | 38 | 0 | 38 |
| 2008 | 45 | 0 | 45 |
| 2009 | 44 | 5 | 49 |
| 2010 | 51 | 2 | 53 |
| 2011 | 39 | 0 | 39 |
| 2012 | 51 | 2 | 53 |
| 2013 | 44 | 1 | 45 |
| 2014 | 49 | 1 | 50 |

Table 4. Numerical data on students coming to study at one of the Medical Universities in Poland, in 2005-2014

| Year | Faculty of Medicine | Faculty of Health Sciences | Total |
|------|---------------------|----------------------------|-------|
| 2005 | 10 | 0 | 10 |
| 2006 | 7 | 0 | 7 |
| 2007 | 10 | 0 | 10 |
| 2008 | 15 | 0 | 15 |
| 2009 | 27 | 0 | 27 |
| 2010 | 28 | 4 | 32 |
| 2011 | 20 | 2 | 22 |
| 2012 | 38 | 0 | 38 |
| 2013 | 45 | 1 | 46 |
| 2014 | 51 | 0 | 51 |

CONCLUSIONS

Education is vital to steering a person's individual lot. What is the most valuable element of studying abroad? Two aspects, perspective and people, seem to be of key importance. When leaving their home country and moving to an international community, a student broadens their point of view from the local perspective of their home country, city or university to the global one, thus enhancing the sense of their own potential and influence. The other vital aspect are people, who, being multinational, contribute their knowledge, culture, openness and readiness to change to the international academic community.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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