

International Student Mobility

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*Presented at the Regional Seminar “Globalizing Knowledge:
European and North American Regions and Policies addressing
the Priority Issues of other UNESCO Regions”*

5-6 March 2007
UNESCO Headquarters, Paris



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Introduction

Globalization as a tendency has become very apparent in higher education. An increasing number of students aspire to spend part of their study time in another higher education institution most often choosing to acquire knowledge and skills necessary for their future profession in international environment. International Centres of Excellence offering higher education of far above the average quality are developing, and the desire of students to acquire new knowledge and experience in such environment is very natural. Such a choice is based not only on the students' wish to acquire more experience, but also on the economic situation development: experts having good knowledge or considerable preliminary knowledge of economies and business traditions of other countries are in an increasing demand in labour market. Therefore study mobility has a tendency to extend at least up to one semester in order to complete as much study courses as possible during it. Not the least of the gains is also social skills in another environment possible to be acquired only in longer period of time. Studies abroad are of especial importance to doctor's degree students for carrying out research.

Student mobility is turning from a luxury available only for some well-off enough students some decades ago into a normal part of study process and a regular requirement for every student to carry out a shorter or longer mobility during their studies. Study mobility is an integral part of the free movement of persons and clearly indicates benefits of international cooperation in higher education. International cooperation in higher education has created several important instruments for carrying out study mobility and for reaching the mobility scale to be observed today.

International Student Mobility: Erasmus

Some countries have been especially active in creating the mentioned instruments through supporting mobility of their own students and through attracting foreign students to their higher education institutions providing them with financial support equal to that of their own students. Meaningful work at marketing their own higher education has transformed universities in several countries into modern study and research centres highly evaluated by students of other countries who are looking for a possibility to spend at least a limited period of time in this environment.

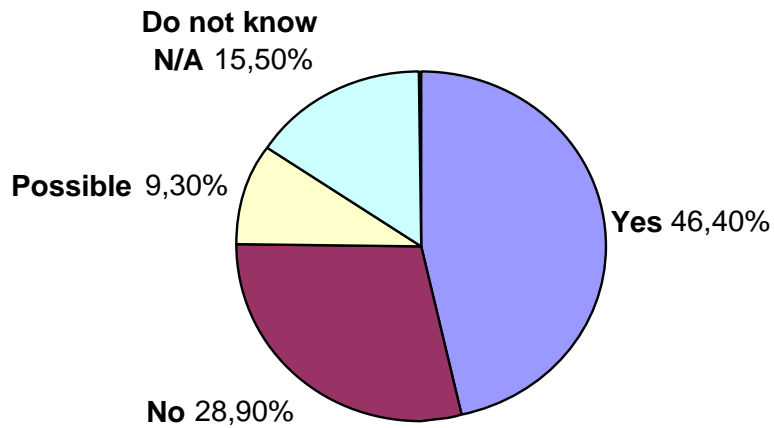
Also on the EU level student mobility has been supported already for 20 years starting the first Erasmus mobility programme back in 1987 when support was provided to more than 3000 students of the then participating EU countries. In 20 years time support to student mobility within Erasmus programme has multiplied, and at present support for studies in another country is enjoyed by 150 000 students per year on the average. The number of participating European countries in the programme has considerably increased over time and now is 31; 9 from every 10 higher education institutions in those countries participate in the programme.

Increase of student mobility in Europe has created a number of challenges and new tasks for the respective national governments because of higher requirements for the preparation of both higher education institutions and students for mobility. Not only number of participants of mobility programme becomes point of reference for evaluating of student mobility, but also the quality of mobility programme offered. More and more students are trying to inquire more about study programme and household conditions offered by host institution even before direct participation in mobility programme.

Inquiries of Latvian students on their participation in Erasmus mobilities showed that in academic year 2002/03 less than a half of programme participants thought positively of working in another

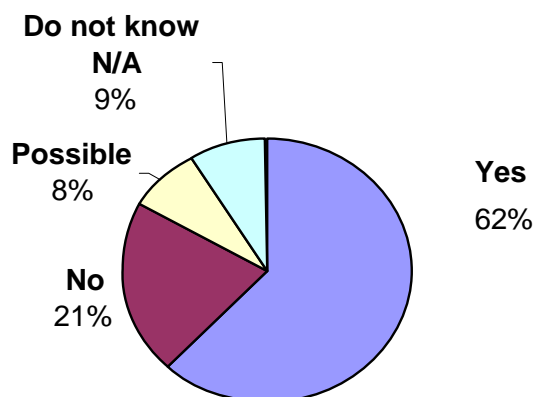
country after their studies, while in 2005/06 this possibility was viewed positively already by 2/3 of the inquired students.

Opinion about possibility to work in another Member State at the end of course as a result of Erasmus experience (2002/2003 ac.y.)



Latvia, n = 211

Opinion about possibility to work in another Member State at the end of course as a result of Erasmus experience (2005/2006 ac.y.)



Latvia, n=553

The Bologna process launched in 1999 tries to find answers also to such questions and to offer support tools for student mobility. However, several international surveys conducted within the framework of Bologna process reveal that opportunities for international student mobility are still insufficient, especially on doctoral study level¹. The previous contribution of Bologna process has to be evaluated positively for offering a number of tools for student support within their mobility period. One must positively evaluate the use of European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) initiated within Bologna process for assessing study results also beyond Erasmus programme in which the ECTS system has been sufficiently tested and has become a recognizable measure in European region.

The international student mobility has become a catalyst of education system as it indicates its quality resulting in a demand for study programmes of a particular higher education institution on the part of foreign students. A considerable proportion of students obtain information on mobility offer via internet as indicated also by almost 40% of students from Latvia participating in Erasmus mobility programme in 2005/06. Information on the chosen foreign higher education institution has become more accessible and is directly available from original providers.

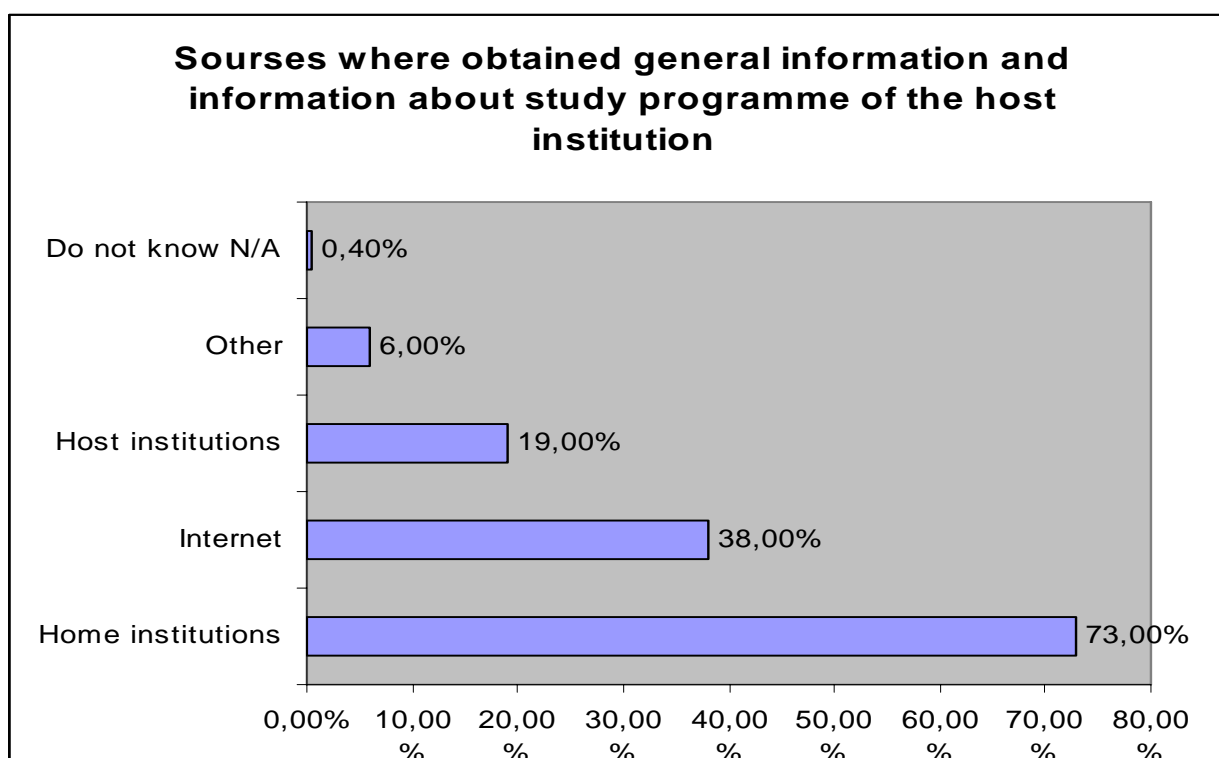
Taking into account the increase of possibilities due to the information and communication technologies, students, on the one hand, have more possibilities to organize mobility periods themselves. On the other hand, increased independence of students in this aspect diminishes the role of teaching staff and higher education institution in organizing mobilities. Students' involvement not only in the use, but also in establishment of mobility programmes is an essential element in order to balance the supply and demand of study process at large and in particular, to ensure the quality of mobility.

For that reason, it is necessary to pay sufficient attention to the development of European higher education area initiated within the Bologna process in order to augment mutual awareness on the development tendencies of higher education in other countries and to provide all actors involved with comparable and adequate information. Another important problem for students choosing to pass part of their study time abroad is the shortage of financial support for a full profit of possibilities offered by such studies. The approach used so far, when the responsibility for the student's financial support during the mobility period lies upon the country of origin, and when support schemes of host country are not available for the foreign student, in many cases creates a serious obstacle for the realization of study mobility.

Such an approach has caused, among other things, purely practical difficulties for Latvian students having chosen to have a study mobility period in a country with higher costs of living. If the grant obtained does not cover all accommodation and study costs in the chosen country, in many cases it is decided to shorten the mobility period in order to decrease total expenses.

In such cases, the possibility to support students from the state is an important stimulus for mobility facilitation but is not, however, always sufficient to reach the aim successfully. The pledge to reduce obstacles preventing successful mobility, including carrying out certain activities for fostering the transferability of national student support systems, as expressed in the final declaration of Berlin's Conference of Ministers, is a basis to initiate a significant discussion on other problems faced by students during mobility periods. However, the issue of financial support to students is not a question to be solved only within education system; it requires an equally intensive involvement in the area of social security and development of tax policies.

¹ESIB's Bologna Analysis 2005 - Bologna with student eyes, 2005



Latvia, n=553

From the very beginning the most essential advantage of Erasmus programme is the following: studies in a higher education institution abroad is part of an initially chosen study programme at home institution guaranteed by relevant contracts concluded between higher education institutions. In 1989 the ECTS was introduced within Erasmus programme in order to improve the quality of student mobility providing a uniform estimation scale for converting differences in study programmes of different countries and for providing foreign students with comparative information about the value of mobility programme. In that way there is no necessity for a student to be a personal mediator between the higher education institution where studies are started and the other institution where specific study courses are acquired, and therefore the result of mobility programme is prospective even before direct participation, and there is also a certainty of positive impact of the mobility period on the overall study process.

Although mobility periods within Erasmus programme are considerably more secured with supporting tools than it is with other mobility programmes, total satisfaction of students with the quality of mobility however is not reached yet in the framework of Erasmus programme.

The main problem faced by Erasmus students in their mobility periods is their inability to integrate into the study environment of another higher education institution. This aspect is reported by nearly 10% of students of Latvia when evaluating their own mobility results for academic year 2005/06.

However, this tendency has decreased in comparison with academic year 2003/04 where this reason was reported by 13.8% of students in their Erasmus mobility evaluation reports. This gives the ground for conclusion that cooperation among higher education institutions has gradually improved in that specific aspect.

It is noteworthy that students themselves have become more active in pursuing the necessary information and not relying too much on somebody in the host institution who would take care of all problems of incoming students. However, the most frequently reported discontent during mobility

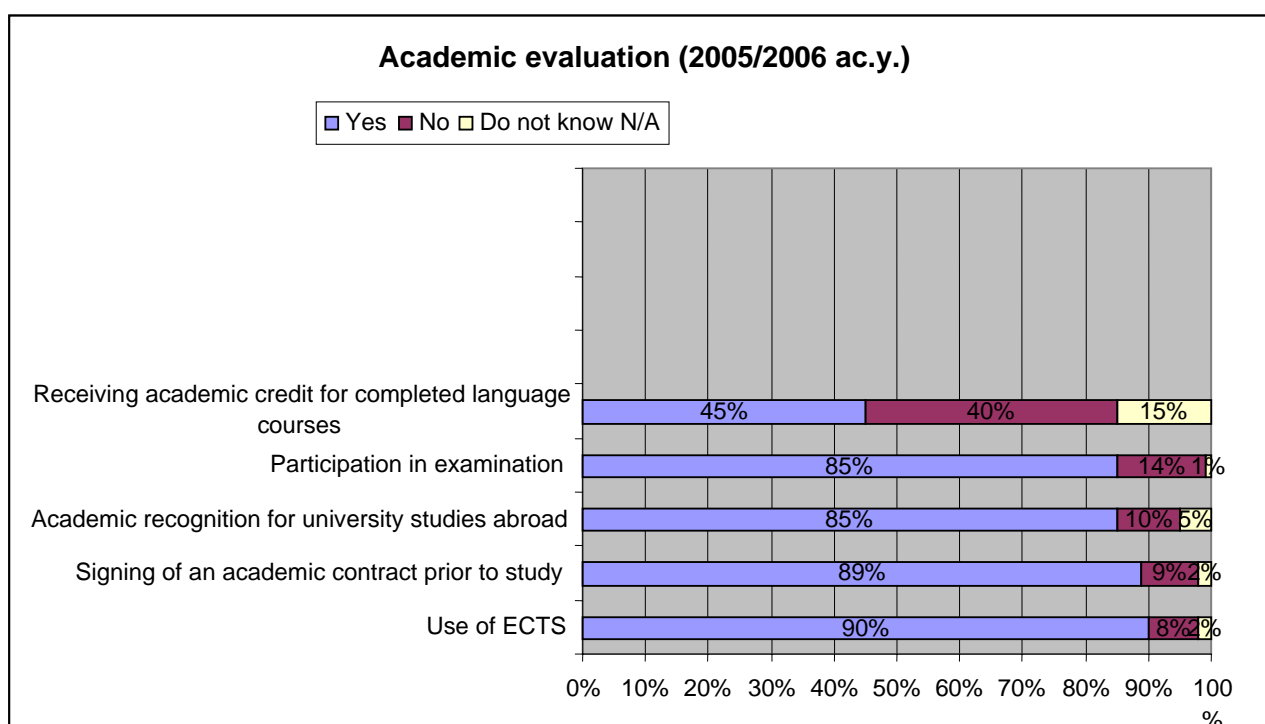
period is problems with lodging and problems that have occurred in study process, for instance, obtaining the necessary study aids.

The lack of reliance that after returning to home institution courses acquired abroad would be recognized is the main shortcoming of other mobility programmes offered by individual national governments or international organizations. Insufficient information about the host institution where study courses are acquired and about the quality of its education, an inflexible approach to integration of foreign study courses in the relevant study programmes, non-recognition as a matter of course implying a sort of punishment for the particular student for venturing to cast doubt on the quality of study programme offered by home institution are among the main reported reasons of the mentioned non-recognition.

Conclusions

Students were asked to make recommendations to other students regarding Erasmus participation. The students from Latvia recommended the following:

- personal initiative, activity and being open to new experiences are crucial;
- try to acquire as much information as possible about the host university, program of study, housing etc.;
- foreign language skills are an absolute necessity;
- seek out opportunities to study as part of the Erasmus program not only for a few months or a semester, but an entire academic year;
- establish contact with former Erasmus students as a source of new information;
- count on higher expenses than anticipated, try to get additional financial aid to supplement the Erasmus grant;
- before leaving for your host university make sure you have filled all your obligations at your university;
- simply take advantage of this excellent opportunity and recommend it to others!



The conclusions made by the Erasmus students, actually, could be related to students who had participated in any other mobility programme.