

# International Student Mobility Within Europe: Responding to National, Regional and Global Challenges



## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT



In many European nations, governments have placed considerable importance on processes of internationalisation within the higher education sector and, in particular, on further enhancing international student mobility (ISM). Attracting inward mobility (through both 'whole degree' as well as short-term or 'credit' mobility) is seen as an effective means of: developing more diverse campuses, furthering the inter-cultural experiences and skills of 'home' students; bolstering the financial position of higher education institutions (HEIs) through the fees paid by incoming students; and exerting 'soft power' when graduates return home.

Indeed, challenging targets have been set in the UK and elsewhere to increase the number of incoming students. Outward mobility has also increasingly come to be prioritised (primarily through credit mobility) as a means of enhancing the inter-cultural skills of students (and thus, it is assumed, their employability). Such governmental objectives have tended to be taken up enthusiastically by individual HEIs, many of which have developed their own mobility schemes in addition to making use of established schemes such as Erasmus+.

Nevertheless, currently, ISM within Europe faces a number of important challenges associated with:

- **the changing political context** – related to, for example: Brexit; the growing significance of China as an increasingly popular destination for mobile students; and the emergence of various 'regional hubs' which offer a cheaper international alternative than Europe to prospective students;
- **increasing awareness of the environmental costs** of physical mobility and the responsibility of HEIs with respect to climate change, alongside the impact of global health concerns, brought into sharp relief by the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- **the socio-economic characteristics of mobile students** – despite some initiatives to widen participation, those who move remain more likely to be from socially privileged families and, where opportunities have been opened up more broadly, they have tended to become stratified, with those from lower income families clustered in lower quality schemes.

An online workshop was held in July 2021, funded by the Institute of Advanced Studies at the University of Surrey, to discuss new research that addresses one or more of these challenges. This policy brief outlines some of the key research findings reported at the workshop and makes some recommendations for policy and practice based upon them.

# GEO-POLITICAL CHALLENGES



## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. European mobility as a (quasi-) public good

The benefits of international student mobility have been primarily conceptualised at the individual level. However, Shields<sup>1</sup> suggests that this perspective obscures positive spillovers across local, national and global scales. For instance, the movement of students in Europe facilitated by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Erasmus+ programme has promoted reciprocal exchanges, climate action and wider public benefits, which go beyond individual advantages. Notwithstanding, public and private benefits accruing through international mobility may vary by the length of the study-abroad period (e.g., credit/degree mobility), the level of study (e.g., Master's/PhD) and the individual characteristics of students.

### 2. Brexit and EU students

Brexit has posed immense challenges to UK higher education. According to an ESRC-funded study which explores the perceived implications of Brexit for HEIs in the four UK nations, the primary concern raised by institutional leaders and senior academics is EU student numbers, with a 40 per cent drop in the January 2021 applications (Papatsiba and Hetherington<sup>2</sup>). Other issues include threats to

cultural diversity, increased intra-national competition between UK universities, as well as heightened competition with institutions globally. It is suggested that a fall in the diversity of the student body may impact academic quality and undermine the international reputation of UK universities - leading to the sector becoming more insular and inward-looking. Lower-ranked, less prestigious universities are also found to be hit hardest by the compound impacts of Brexit alongside pre-existing issues within the hierarchical sector.



### 3. Geopolitics, Erasmus+ and institutional networks

Erasmus+ programmes have been central to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) through promoting student mobility between European countries. However, uneven mobility patterns between countries are a major impediment to a unified higher education area within Europe. Network analysis of Erasmus+ student mobility data from 2019 reveals that countries tend to establish mobility agreements with those nations which send or receive similar numbers of students to themselves (Bulut Sahin, Söylemez and Sahin<sup>3</sup>). This

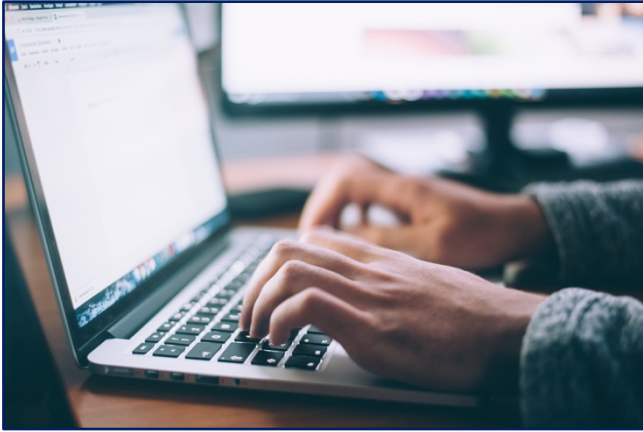
<sup>1</sup> Robin Shields, University of Bristol, UK. *European Mobility as a Public Good for Sustainable Societies*.

<sup>2</sup> Vassiliki Papatsiba and Alex Hetherington, University of Sheffield, UK. *Institutional representations of*

*European students in UK higher education in response to Brexit*.

<sup>3</sup> Betül Bulut Şahin, Emrah Söylemez and Şavas Zafer Şahin, Middle East Technical University, Turkey. A

reinforces a centre/periphery divide between sub-regions within Europe, which reflects the broader geopolitical positions and pragmatic preferences of individual countries involved in the Erasmus+ programme.



#### 4. Politics of international doctoral students' writing practices

Internationalisation has been a key policy focus of higher education within and beyond Europe. The incorporation of intercultural and international dimensions into teaching and learning is seen as integral to this process. According to research funded by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), the academic writing experience of international doctoral students in two UK HEIs is nevertheless fragmented by power relations embedded in unequal supervisory relationships and colonial histories (Hinton-Smith, Danvers, Mazanderani and Webb<sup>4</sup>). The 'othering' of international students and their ways of knowing poses a significant challenge to a sense of belonging and experiences during their studies in the UK.

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*Network Analysis of the Geopolitical Structure of Erasmus+ Student Mobility in European Higher Education Area.*

<sup>4</sup> Tamsin Hinton-Smith, Emily Danvers, Fawzia Haeri Mazanderani and Rebecca Webb, University of Sussex,

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### FOR NATIONAL POLICYMAKERS

#### 1. Introduce regional quotas

Spatial disparities in the Erasmus+ programme can be minimised by setting a quota for different sub-regions/hubs. Ensuring rigorous quality assurance of the structure and delivery of degree programmes across both programme and partner countries can also facilitate mutual recognition and student exchanges beyond regional hubs and core institutions.

### FOR UNIVERSITIES AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

#### 1. Rethink approach to EU student recruitment

The startling fall in EU applications raises important issues around the approach that UK universities have so far taken to recruit students from EU countries. Instead of taking a laissez-faire approach that focuses on peer recommendations or assumes EU students' easy access to employment and loans will support their continued mobility to the UK, universities need to be more proactive in recruiting EU student recruitment in line with practices in other international markets.

#### 2. Disseminate best practices

Efforts to reduce an imbalance in Erasmus+ exchanges between countries require

*UK. International Doctoral Students' Writing Practices: Mobility, transitions and translations across writing and knowing.*

individual institutions – particularly those in the periphery of the network – to disseminate best practices. This can help them to increase the visibility of positive experiences with partner universities, promote further collaborations and exchanges, and alleviate a centre/periphery divide between sub-regions/hubs.



### 3. Expand the decolonising agenda of higher education

The politics of academic writing practices amongst international doctoral students highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of decolonisation in higher education, which moves beyond a focus merely on the curriculum. In addition, it requires university-wide commitment.

### 4. Create alternative spaces within the university

Academic writing is fundamental to the experiences of international doctoral students. It is therefore important first to recognise that the imposition of writing norms of the Western, Anglophone countries may constitute a form of epistemological violence with respect to these students. Also, there is a pressing need to create spaces within academia to value alternative ways of knowing and subvert deficit narratives of international students.

<sup>5</sup> Suvi Jokila, University of Turku, Finland and Charles Mathies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. *Silence during*

## HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES



### KEY FINDINGS

#### 1. Crisis communication and international students

Covid-19 has brought to the fore the importance of crisis communication to the public. Despite the emphasis placed by national governments on recruiting and retaining international students, in terms of national crisis communication strategy, students have not been equally positioned. This is borne out by a study which demonstrates information gaps and divergent channels in communicating pandemic measures between domestic and international students in Finland (Jokilla and Mathies<sup>5</sup>). Such gaps were exacerbated by the language used in official communications (Finnish/Swedish and only limited English) and the means of communication (relying on only official sources). As such the communication was predominantly left to the HEIs to take the responsibility for distributing information to international students.

#### 2. Safety, security, and Chinese and East Asian students in the UK

The latest outbreak of coronavirus has led to renewed concern about the safety and security of international students. As the virus was initially described in racist terms, Chinese and East Asian students have been particularly affected by such framings and subject to discrimination. Nevertheless, despite the

*a pandemic: how crisis communication constructs international students' position in Finland.*

prevalence of racial discrimination, recent research on Chinese (and Chinese presenting) international students in the UK indicates a low level of reporting of hate crimes to universities and local police forces amongst these students (Lim, Li, Yu, Levy, Wang, Li and Ban<sup>6</sup>). This has important implications for international students, HEIs and wider society, as this affects international students' experience and well-being while in the UK as well as the recruitment of these students in the long term.



### 3. Covid-19 and prospective Chinese masters' students

Covid-19 has also impacted students' ability to travel. Many current students have been stuck in limbo (either in their home country or the country in which they are studying), while numerous prospective students have suspended or delayed their plans to study abroad. A study of prospective Chinese masters' students who have deferred their studies in the UK highlights some of these concerns (Yu, He and Cao<sup>7</sup>). It is reported that tensions often arise between students and their parents, as there is no tradition/culture of having a gap year in China and hence little

<sup>6</sup> Miguel Lim, Hanwei Li, Jingran Yu, Katja Levy, Ammeline Wang, Boya Li and Xueting Ban, University of Manchester, UK. *COVID and Chinese and East Asian University Students in the UK: Safety, Security, and Communication*.

understanding from parents. This is heightened by the lack of frequent and updated information from universities in the UK.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### FOR NATIONAL POLICYMAKERS

#### 1. Address discrepancy in communication practices

There is an urgent need for non-English speaking countries in Europe to address disconnects between different languages in use (e.g., a language of instruction, institution-wide communications, a working language). Without appropriate measures, international students may miss out on key information needed for crisis management and compromise their experience and well-being while abroad.

#### 2. Improve statistics that relate to crimes against international students

The improvement of crime statistics is needed, as police forces are currently not required to record a victim's occupation and neither are local data comparable to those available nationally (at least in the case of the UK). This would help the police to systematically collect and compile statistics on hate crimes relating to university students and international students in particular and address those incidents more effectively.

<sup>7</sup> Yun Yu, Rui He and Xueming Cao, Shanghai Normal University, China. *The "Chosen" UK? Re-imagining of International Education Mobility for Prospective Chinese Master Students during the Covid-19 Pandemic*

## FOR UNIVERSITIES AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS



### 1. Tackle racism and hate crimes

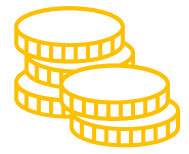
An institutional hotline needs to be set up for students suffering from racial discrimination and hate crimes. This should include efforts to raise awareness amongst international students of the importance of recording such crimes, as the presence of institutional support does not directly translate into students making use of such support. Student unions or student societies might also be helpful as international students tend to rely on peer-to-peer support.

### 2. Make clear and proactive communication

Regular and empathic communication during a crisis is important for both prospective and current students. Not only does this reduce uncertainty surrounding evolving situations and higher education institutions' safety precautions, but it also builds a foundation of trust and transparency in the institution.

<sup>8</sup> Georgiana Mihut, University of Warwick, UK. *Skills, happiness, and democratic attitudes among international, migrant, and domestic graduates. A socio-*

## SOCIO- ECONOMIC CHALLENGES



## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. International student mobility as a tool for societal change

Just as recent ecological and socio-political changes have had an effect on the movement of international students, so too international student mobility can be used to tackle various challenges at the macro level. A study drawing on Eurograduate survey pilot data has lent support to this claim by demonstrating the positive correlations between study abroad and self-reported levels of skills, happiness and democratic attitudes (e.g., trust and political participation) (Mihut<sup>8</sup>). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there are important differences across various groups of students, with migrant graduates (i.e. graduates with a migrant background – not necessarily those who have moved abroad for study) indicating lower levels of skills and trust than their domestic and international counterparts.

### 2. Democratisation of international mobility through scholarships

Scholarships have played a major role in enabling the mobility of international students. However, previous studies suggest that these scholarships usually cater to students from more privileged backgrounds and thereby reproduce their social advantage across national borders. Mixed-methods research that examines the experiences of Mexican doctoral

*economic analysis of risk and protective factors using Eurograduate pilot data.*

scholarship recipients provides a more complex picture (Lopez-Murillo<sup>9</sup>). The study finds that about a third of the respondents came from lower socio-economic backgrounds. It also demonstrates that international mobility experiences provide these students with the opportunities to enhance their capabilities and freedom as well as bring wider social benefits.



### 3. Social selectivity in internationalisation activities at home

Due to the socially selective nature of international student mobility, the benefits of internationalisation of higher education have thus far been mainly limited to those from higher socio-economic backgrounds. In order to address this, higher education institutions around the world have increasingly focused on various internationalisation activities at home. According to a recent research on students studying at three HEIs in Belgium and the Netherlands, participation in internationalisation activities is nonetheless characterised by social selectivity (Van Mol and Perez-Encinas<sup>10</sup>). Students from low

<sup>9</sup> Karla Lopez-Murillo, UCL, UK. *Diverse socio-economic backgrounds and international pathways. Mobility opportunities through a scholarship programme for Mexican doctoral students.*

<sup>10</sup> Christof Van Mol and Adriana Perez-Encinas, Tilburg University, The Netherlands; Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain. *Going beyond mobility: do different*

socio-economic backgrounds, for instance, are less likely to participate in such activities compared to students from higher socio-economic backgrounds. As such, it seems that internationalisation at home activities do not always reach more diverse groups compared to study abroad programmes, whereas this very often is the aim of these activities.

### 4. Growing diversification and stratification

As participation in international student mobility has widened, the social profiles of mobile students have become diversified. Brooks<sup>11</sup> indicates that this can be attributed to the supply and demand of international education. Supply-side factors include education and migration policies in sending countries as well as the recruitment strategies of individual universities and education agents. Decisions made by individual families and students also contribute to the diversification of international student body. Importantly, this has resulted in the stratification of experience and outcomes of those undertaking credit or degree mobility, with those from more privileged backgrounds more likely to access 'top-tier' institutions and/or programmes.



*(social) groups of students need different internationalisation activities?*

<sup>11</sup> Rachel Brooks, University of Surrey, UK. *International student mobilities. Socio-economic diversification and implications for higher education staff.*

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### FOR NATIONAL POLICYMAKERS

#### 1. Widen participation through scholarships

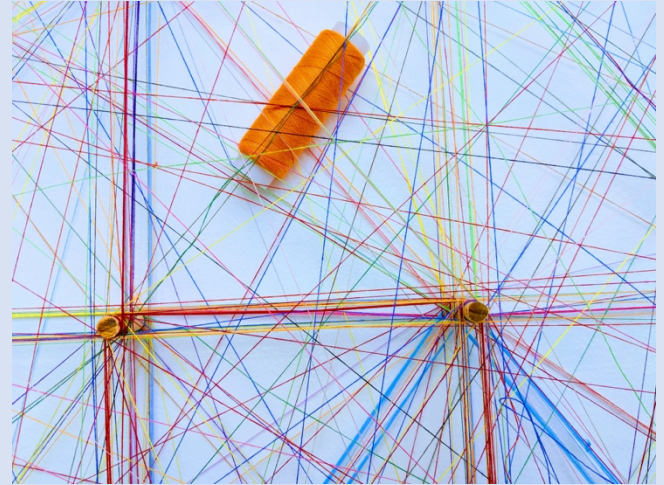
The provision of scholarships for international mobility needs to target specifically those from low socio-economic backgrounds and/or from low participation neighbourhoods. Given the stratification of mobility programmes, it is also important to ensure that any gaps in the quality of degree programmes are minimised, and that student experiences and outcomes are of a similar high quality.

#### 2. Improve international student data

The existing data on international students at the national and institutional levels need to be improved to capture the socio-economic status of international students in greater detail. This will help to widen access to international education amongst less privileged individuals and expand the function of international student mobility beyond the reproduction of social advantage across national borders.



### FOR UNIVERSITIES AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS



#### 1. Promote short-term mobility for students

It is crucial to prioritise short-term mobility based on projects and internships, since they can accommodate various needs of students who have other commitments such as caring responsibilities. This should be accompanied by efforts to disseminate the value of international mobility to students, especially those from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds.

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