



Higher education mobilities: a cross-national European comparison

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ABSTRACT

Within the extant literature on patterns of mobility of European higher education students there is some recognition that these differ across geographical space – in relation to variations in national uptake of the European Union's Erasmus scheme, for example. However, strong similarities are also often identified – about the way in which mobility is desired by students, higher education institutions and national governments, and how this is stimulated, in part, by various European initiatives such as the commitment to forging a European Higher Education Area. Moreover, while scholars have critiqued normative expectations of mobility – pointing out, for example, that not all students have the necessary social, cultural and economic resources to support a period of study abroad – there has been less critical focus on the way in which constructions of the 'mobile student' vary spatially. This article draws on a dataset of 92 policy documents from six European nations to argue that, while some convergence is notable, particularly in relation to the ways in which student mobility is placed centre-stage within internationalisation strategies, key differences are also evident – with respect to: the scale of desired mobility; the characteristics of the imagined 'mobile subject'; the extent to which social justice concerns are brought into play; and the prioritisation given to outward mobility. These raise important questions about the degree of 'policy convergence' across Europe and the ostensible homogenisation of European higher education systems around an Anglo-American model.

1. Introduction

Europe represents an important – and yet often overlooked – space for scholars interested in international student mobility. Through efforts to develop a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the European Union (EU) has pursued a highly managed, top-down strategy of convergence, with the aim of creating a strong higher education region that can compete with other parts of the world, and notably the US (Robertson, 2009). Student mobility has often been viewed as an important part of this project – particularly the Erasmus scheme¹, established in 1987, which encourages movement between member states of the EU, with the aim of facilitating economic integration (by normalising cross-border movement) and helping to foster a European political identity. The Erasmus scheme has also driven initiatives to standardise higher education across the continent, through the expectation that participating departments integrate their curricula and ensure that students' academic achievements abroad are formally recognised in their home institution. It is timely to explore such trends in the second half of the 21st century, as the UK prepares to leave the EU, and other European nations are reassessing their own relationship to their neighbours within the continent.

Within the extant literature on patterns of mobility of European

higher education students there is some recognition that these differ across geographical space – in relation to variations in national uptake of the Erasmus scheme, for example, and the relative attractiveness of particular European nations to mobile students (King, 2003; van Mol, 2014). However, strong similarities are also often identified – about the way in which mobility is desired by students, higher education institutions (HEIs) and national governments, and how this is stimulated, in part, by various European initiatives such as the Bologna Process. Moreover, while scholars have critiqued normative expectations of mobility – pointing out, for example, that not all students have the necessary social, cultural and economic resources to support a period of study abroad – there has been less attention to the way in which constructions of the 'mobile student' vary spatially. This article draws on policy documents from six European nations to argue that, while some convergence is apparent, particularly in relation to the ways in which student mobility is placed centre-stage within internationalisation strategies, key differences are also evident – with respect to: the scale of desired mobility; the characteristics of the imagined 'mobile subject'; the extent to which social justice concerns are brought into play; and the prioritisation given to *outward* mobility. These raise important questions about the degree of 'policy convergence' across Europe and the ostensible homogenisation of European higher education systems.

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¹ The scheme enables students to spend one or two semesters at an HEI in another European country.

The first part of the article situates the research within extant debates, focussing on, firstly, the extent to which studies have explored differences within overall patterns of student mobility and, secondly, the value of examining the constructions of student mobility and mobile students within policy across European nation-states. It then outlines the methods that were used in the empirical study, before moving on to examine the ways in which student mobility was constructed across six European nations. These constructions are then drawn together in the discussion, which considers the implications of the analysis for our understanding of European higher education in general and student mobilities more specifically.

2. Background

2.1. *The differentiated nature of student mobility*

Transnational mobility, it is argued, has become a key means of young people achieving a successful transition to adulthood – associated with obtaining education and white collar employment, and engaging in middle class consumption practices (Jeffrey, 2010). Moreover, Robertson et al. (2018) have contended that mobility should not be seen as merely a means of securing better education and employment prospects but, in itself, constituting a new space of identification and belonging. While clearly students are not synonymous with young people (many young people are not students, and some students are significantly older), higher education policymakers have increasingly valorised transnational mobility, implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) positioning it as a central mechanism for the production of strategic, cosmopolitan citizens, and often valuing mobile citizen-subjects more highly than their non-mobile peers (Brooks and Waters, 2011). Nevertheless, academic scholarship has shown effectively that this ‘mobility imperative’ is not played out in uniform ways. Indeed, the differentiated nature of student mobility has been a particular focus of scholarly attention. With respect to the global context, research has indicated how such flows of students have typically been from less affluent countries to richer, Anglophone nations and have thus had the effect of reinforcing geographical power inequalities (Brooks and Waters, 2011).

However, over recent years, the picture has become more complex, with nations that have traditionally sent large numbers of students abroad aggressively pursuing their own strategies for increasing inward mobility. China is perhaps the best example of this, with a declared ambition to receive 500,000 international students by 2020, and well-articulated plans at national, provincial and institutional level to achieve this goal (Gao and de Wit, 2017). Indeed, it has already overtaken Australia, France and Germany to become the third most popular destination country for international students after the US and UK (ibid.). In addition, restrictive immigration policies have affected student flows in countries that have historically been popular with mobile students. In the UK, for example, the severe restrictions on international students’ ability to work in the country post-graduation, in place from 2010 onwards, have had a significant negative impact on the number of incoming Indian students. Within Europe, student mobility is also differentiated. In general terms, the majority of mobility has tended to be from east to west. As a consequence, Kenway and Fahey (2007) contend that, when students return home after their studies, knowledge is ‘transferred’ from central points of power in the European system to more marginal locations; mobility schemes can thus be understood as means of ‘effecting cultural de- and re-territorialisation’ (p.32). Similar differences have been noted in relation to the Erasmus programme. Western nations such as Spain, Germany, France, the UK and Italy typically receive the most incoming students, while more geographically and politically peripheral countries, such as Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovenia receive relatively few (European Commission, 2015; Statistics for All, n.d.). In explaining these patterns, King (2003) has suggested that national economic strength, perceived quality of the

higher education system and, in particular, language spoken have some influence. Overall, however, it is clear that patterns of mobility across Europe remain both complex and uneven (Shields, 2017).

While the quantitative evidence highlights the geographically circumscribed nature of international student mobility, various assumptions are nevertheless made within the literature about strong commonalities across nation-states. These are most frequently articulated with respect to countries of the Global North, but are increasingly applied to other nations, too. It is typically argued that international students are desired by both national governments and individual HEIs as a means of boosting income, demonstrating ‘international excellence’ and, in some cases, encouraging immigration (Lomer, 2017; Robertson, 2013). Similarly, various researchers have maintained that the motivations of individual students who are internationally mobile (and their families) are often strikingly similar, irrespective of their country of origin – particularly the desire to accrue capital to secure advantage in graduate labour markets (e.g. Bodycott, 2009). Within Europe, specifically, national governments, HEIs and individual students have all been strongly encouraged to facilitate or participate in regional cross-border mobility as a means of consolidating the European Higher Education Area. Moreover, EU mobility targets have been set, in the expectation that all member states will accord similar priority to this policy area. It is argued that such initiatives are part of the wider homogenisation of higher education systems across Europe around an Anglo-American model (e.g. Sam and der Sijde, 2014). The normative expectations of mobility, articulated in, for example, these European targets have been heavily critiqued by researchers who have pointed out that not all students have the necessary social, cultural and economic resources to support a period of study abroad (e.g. Mitchell, 2006). There has been much less of a critical focus, however, on the ways in which constructions of the ‘mobile student’ vary spatially – both across and within nations (although see Holdsworth, 2009, for a notable exception with respect to intra-national mobility). This article seeks to contribute to building knowledge in this area by focussing on policy constructions in particular.

2.2. *Policy texts as window on student mobility*

To date, policy texts – alongside various other structural influences – have been relatively overlooked within research on student mobilities (Geddie, 2015; Lomer, 2017). Indeed, Findlay et al. (2017) have suggested that much of the extant literature in this area is based on an implicit assumption that mobility is demand-driven (through the choices made by individual students and their families). While this rather over-states the position – and fails to acknowledge some of the important work on, for example, the actions and influence of individual HEIs (see Beech, 2018; Sidhu, 2006; Tannock, 2017) – it is fair to say that supply-side factors have received notably less attention from researchers. Policy can be seen as a key ‘supply-side force’ in the sense that it is an important means through which those who provide and benefit from promoting international study opportunities help to shape the pattern of cross-border student flows (Findlay et al., 2017).

Policy texts can be seen as one of the material objects upon which much mobility depends (Sheller, 2017), through giving meaning to this particular social process. Cresswell (2011) has argued that mobility is as much about meaning as it is about mappable and calculable movement, and thus as much an ethical and political issue as a utilitarian and practical one (p. 552). From this perspective, paying attention to the ways in which mobilities are discussed within policy texts and the means through which the figure of the ‘mobile student’ is constructed is a valuable endeavour. It can also be a useful corrective to the focus on student motivations and experiences that, as noted above, constitutes a large proportion of the research in this area. Indeed, Madge et al. (2015) have argued that, by focussing exclusively on student experiences, researchers run the risk of obscuring the important underlying power relationships that structure global knowledge economies; in

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