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Review

Career consequences of transnational educational mobility: A systematic literature review



Stine Waibel*, Heiko Rüger, Andreas Ette, Lenore Sauer

Federal Institute for Population Research, Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 4, 65185 Wiesbaden, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Transnational educational mobility (TEM) – stays abroad between and during basic and post-secondary education – has become increasingly popular in advanced societies. In this systematic research review, we synthesize findings of existing empirical studies on the potential career benefits of educational mobility. Our extensive search procedure yielded 65 documents that were reviewed with respect to three vertical career outcomes: career planning skills, transition into employment, and professional status or income. Results reveal a moderate positive effect of educational mobility on income after graduation. While individuals themselves perceive a connection between their transnational mobility practices and subsequent job search success, objective effect assessments disprove assumptions about faster school to work transitions. Individuals also perceive a positive impact of TEM on career planning skills, but studies using more elaborate methods report no impact. The review also buttresses the relevance of individual and contextual factors as moderators of the career impact of educational mobility.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: stine.waibel@bib.bund.de (S. Waibel), heiko.rueger@bib.bund.de (H. Rüger), andreas.ette@bib.bund.de (A. Ette), lenore.sauer@bib.bund.de (L. Sauer).

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and research questions

Today, studying abroad and gaining international experience during one's educational career has become more accessible due to national and supranational policies that facilitate and subsidize freedom of movement (e.g. Erasmus). We call this phenomenon transnational educational mobility (TEM) encompassing all temporary stays abroad between and during secondary and post-secondary education in formal as well as informal contexts. TEM experiences are made by students participating in organized study abroad and placement programs, by children and adolescents who reside temporarily in a foreign country because of international migration decisions of their parents, or by young people taking time out from their studies to pursue international volunteering or self-organized international learning activities (often referred to as a "gap year").

Considering its strong growth curve in recent decades (Altbach & Knight, 2007), TEM is part of a process that Adrian Favell and his colleagues have described as the "massification [...] of international migration opportunities linked to careers and education" (Favell, Feldblum, & Smith, 2007, p. 17). TEM has ceased to be a privilege of a very small elite group as it has been in the past. Ultimately, this reflects a trend toward internationalization now firmly entrenched in the organizational and programmatic operations of educational systems across the world (Standley, 2015). At the same time, the experience of TEM is increasingly linked to human capital endowments and better labor market chances in political and public discourses (Brooks, Waters, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Fischer, 2010; Teichler, 2007). This employability-enhancing-perspective on TEM is now taken for granted by various stakeholders including universities, governments, employers, and graduates themselves (cf. European Commission, 2014; Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Neeß, 2015; Stronkhorst, 2005; World Economic Forum, 2011).

However, despite a great deal of public and political discourse, researchers as well as practitioners have repeatedly complained that experiential and anecdotal evidence on the employment benefits and outcomes of TEM goes along with limited empirical evidence (e.g. Amit, 2010, p. 11; Di Pietro, 2013, p. 5; House of Lords, 2012, pp. 29–30; King, Findlay, & Ahrens, 2010, p. 33; Martin, 2006, p. 138; Poot & Roskrugge, 2013, p. 1; Teichler, 2007, 2015, p. 12, p. 31). This skepticism seems particularly justified with respect to TEM experiences in *Western industrialized countries*, i.e. North-America, Australia, and European countries. In contrast to the substantial educational migration from non-Western states to predominantly English-speaking destination countries, often motivated by a *private investment* in educational quality and educational opportunities lacking in students' home countries,¹ TEM in advanced societies also has a strong *consumptive* value (Waters, Brooks, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). Nevertheless, it often goes unquestioned that individuals profit from TEM in many ways, while studies miss the opportunity for a more critical examination (Olwig & Valentin, 2015, p. 249).

In this systematic review we provide a synthesis of the accumulated state of knowledge on the career consequences of TEM in the Western world. We bring together disparate streams of work, primarily in educational and economic research. Since our focus is on the *vertical* dimension of career outcomes (e.g., income and professional status), we were not interested in studies that looked at the effect of TEM on *horizontal* career dimensions (characteristics of employment, e.g. holding an international job).²

In particular, we seek to answer the following refined research questions that are present, implicitly or explicitly, in the literature reviewed:

1. Does transnational educational mobility have a positive effect on indicators of vertical career outcomes?
2. Do studies that use subjective assessments of career impact (i.e. self-evaluations) report different effects of TEM on career outcomes than studies that use objective outcome measures (e.g., income or status) do?
3. Do existing studies allow for the attribution of causality to these effects?

¹ High levels of private investments in foreign tertiary education are particularly common across East Asia (Biao & Shen, 2009, p. 521).

² We also disregard studies on the relationship between studying abroad and subsequent migration for work after graduation. International (geographical) career mobility is not necessarily an indicator of vertical career success.

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