



Uneven mobility experiences: Life-strategy expectations among Eastern European undergraduate students in the UK and Spain



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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the uneven mobility experiences of Eastern European (EE) undergraduate students within the European Union (EU) as a fundamental aspect of human intra-European mobility. It addresses the issue of student mobility by focusing on two samples of Romanian and Bulgarian undergraduates studying in the UK and Spain, after the EU enlargement towards the East. Based on 70 in-depth qualitative interviews, the study evaluates the motivations, experiences and expectations of students and their families in the context of life-course trajectories. I argue that the socio-economic situation of the country of origin, the different strategies used by EE students and their families, and the country they choose for study overseas – the UK or Spain – create uneven mobility and influence their future life-strategy mobility after graduation. The main thematic findings, that is, mobility as a platform for permanent migration and family reunification, uncertain mobility as a tool for competition, and mobility for return, show the relation between the reasons why students study overseas and subsequent mobility aspirations. The conclusions highlight the need to integrate mobile students into the study of mobility as pivotal actors in the global circuit of mobility who favour both host and origin societies.

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Introduction

Mobility as expressed in temporary and permanent movement is an important element of post-communist restructuring in Europe. After the EU enlargement to Eastern Europe, the new context of open borders, which favours the free movement of people, provides an important arena for student mobility research. In line with the new mobilities paradigm, introduced by Sheller and Urry (2006, p. 207), and which highlighted that ‘all the world seems to be on the move’, it is argued that Eastern European (EE) migrants are not longer immigrants but free movers who are more likely to engage in temporary circular and transnational mobility rather than long-term permanent immigration. In this context, sending children overseas for education is a life-strategy used by parents to ensure their children’s future, and indirectly their own, against the poverty and economic and social insecurities of their countries (Li et al., 1996). Although there is a vibrant literature on student mobility (Ackers, 2005; Vinken, 2007; Waters, 2005; Ong, 1999) few studies (Balaz and Williams, 2004; Ferro, 2004) have focused on EE students and the different reasons why they choose to study in different EU countries.

This article studies the uneven mobility experiences of EE undergraduate students in the EU as a fundamental aspect of

human intra-European mobility. Based on an in-depth empirical study, the paper seeks to address this gap in knowledge by evaluating the experiences and expectations of students and their families in the context of life-course trajectories. As Waters (2005, p. 359) argued, the ‘overseas educational experience’ is a significant objective of many middle-class families and migration is frequently the means to this end. Taking into account that the motivation for international student mobility must be related to subsequent mobility intentions with regard to the rest of the life course (Findlay et al., 2012), this article focuses on the mobility behaviour and patterns expressed in motivations, perceptions and expectations of EE students studying at universities in two EU countries: the UK and Spain. The study provides an analysis of uneven experiences of mobility, embracing and contrasting the different ways in which students from Eastern Europe choose mobility and what their expectations are at the end of their period of study. These expectations expressed by the students interviewed, which are: (1) mobility as a platform for permanent migration and family reunification, (2) uncertain mobility as a tool for competition, and (3) mobility for return, represent the main thematic findings of this paper.

In line with Waters (2005), who emphasises the importance of education in the transnational strategies of lower-middle class families, this paper highlights the role of the family in students’ decision to study at a foreign university. Although all the families

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of the student sample belong to the lower-middle class, I argue that various factors, such as the socio-economic situation of the country of origin, the different strategies used by EE students and their families, and the country they choose for study overseas – the UK or Spain – create uneven mobility experiences and influence their life-strategy mobility after graduation. On the one hand, in the case of UK universities, EE undergraduates are attracted to the idea of study overseas by the promise of getting an education at a prestigious institution and the prospect of an international career. On the other hand, students who choose Spain for study overseas are mostly children of migrants in Spain, or returnees who were immigrants in Spain. The fact that their parents knew Spain and the Spanish language motivated them to choose Spain for study, with the prior expectation of returning to their country of origin after finishing their degrees. Students took advantage of the circumstances of their families, even though, in some cases, they would have preferred to study in the UK, as observed in the fieldwork. Therefore, their choice became, as [Brooks and Waters \(2009\)](#) have argued, a ‘second chance’ to study overseas. Following [Waters \(2005, p. 360\)](#), I conceive student mobility as part of a more general child-centred familial strategy of capital accumulation involving migration, mobility and transnational household arrangements.

This article contributes to an understanding of the complex geographies of students and to the emerging concepts within this area through the idea of uneven mobility experiences. After outlining the theoretical framework, the article traces the trends of EE student mobility towards the UK and Spain. Subsequently, I explain the methodology used, and I analyse the interviews with students and their families to highlight their uneven experiences and life-strategy expectations. The conclusions foreground the need to integrate mobile students into the study of mobility as active players and pivotal actors in the global circuit of mobility.

Conceptualising the research context

Researchers in international student mobility ([Findlay, 2011](#); [Murphy-Lejeune, 2002](#)) identify internationally mobile students as a migratory elite ready and willing to move and open to changes in their environment: language, personal entourage, lifestyle or working style. This article argues that the mobility of EE students has to be analysed and conceptualised from the perspective of the new trends of mobility that were created after the enlargement of the EU to Eastern Europe. This mobility is still midway between migration inherited from previous generations, based on economic factors (to find a job, to access higher incomes), and mobility to study overseas, to take up a short work placement or travel ([Balaz and Williams, 2004](#)). As [Kou and Bailey \(2014, p.116\)](#) suggested, international experiences and opportunities are seen as a means of personal development and, more importantly, migration is seen as a career improvement strategy. This perspective has been developed in prior research, which has revealed that family and more specifically parents can encourage their children to migrate as a means of maintaining a family’s social-class position ([Cairns and Smith, 2011](#)), or as a life-strategy to improve the future well-being of the family.

To conceptualise student mobility in the family context, I use the broad concept of ‘transnationalism’, which has emerged as a cross-border field where migrants on the move for opportunities of work try to maintain and forge new relationships with their home country ([Glick Schiller et al., 1992](#)) and play an active role in shaping transnational space ([Hannerz, 1996](#)). The literature on transnational families ([Waters, 2005](#); [Robertson, 2013](#)) shows that a transnational perspective facilitates an understanding of the ways in which families have utilised spatial strategies in the

accumulation of different forms of capital within the family unit ([Waters, 2005, p. 362](#)). This is where the work of [Bourdieu \(1984\)](#) is useful for understanding the significance of these practices for the social and cultural reproduction of the family, which affects the social and cultural capital of students in the education system. Simultaneously, [Bourdieu’s \(1977\)](#) notion of habitus has provided an essential framework for understanding students’ experiences. Habitus is taken here as ‘(…) a set of acquired characteristics which are the product of social conditioning (…) totally or partially common to people of similar social conditioning’ ([Bourdieu, 2005, p. 45](#)). The habitus is socially constructed and thus access to capital acquisition is not universal but hierarchical, meaning that those families who have the ‘wrong’ type of cultural capital may find it difficult to adjust to situations where their ‘type’ of cultural capital is not commonplace ([Savage et al., 2005](#)).

Drawing on Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and cultural capital, I argue that for EE lower-middle class families, financing the international education of their children presents, as [Waters \(2006, p. 188\)](#) noted, an ‘opportunity to obtain a scarcer more valuable type of cultural capital in the form of a Western university degree’. Although parents of EE students have few resources, they make significant efforts to keep their children in foreign universities, especially in the UK. They are thus non-traditional students, defined by [Christie \(2007\)](#) as first generation university attendees from working class or minority backgrounds, that can experience much greater difficulties in ‘fitting in’ at university. In contrast to this notion of disadvantage, [Lehmann \(2009\)](#) suggests that a lower-middle class habitus can construct a moral advantage whereby the commonly held dispositions of students (maturity, responsibility and life experience) in fact act as tools which can give students the opportunity to realise their lower-middle class ambitions. Consequently, some of the ‘young people with fewer opportunities’ ([Colley et al., 2007, p. 13](#)) employ mobility strategies after graduation to improve their future careers.

As noted above, the life-course strategy approach is the conceptual link that helps understand future mobility decisions ([Kou and Bailey, 2014, p. 119](#)). Extending this argument along the lines of [Findlay et al. \(2012\)](#) and [Madge et al. \(2014\)](#), I suggest that the mobility of EE students should be considered in the context of mobile careers and mobile lives, in which students develop the capital required for ‘employability’. As [Murphy-Lejeune \(2002, p. 100\)](#) noted, what distinguishes young European students from other nomads is ‘the qualitative investment in their futures’. She goes on to claim that ‘aware of economic competition, they appreciate the professional stakes of an international position’ ([Murphy-Lejeune \(2002, p. 100\)](#)) and believe that overseas education develops the ‘mobility capital’ which may help them to obtain such employment.

While the link between transnational student mobility and the decision to work overseas and to continue mobility after graduation has rarely been studied in the EU context, this complex issue has been widely studied in the Asia Pacific region ([Robertson, 2013](#); [Baas, 2010](#); [Waters, 2005](#); [Ong, 1999](#)). This literature shows that studying overseas helps to prepare students for future mobility and competition. In the case of EE overseas students, previous education mobility is a very important determinant of mobility later in life, and increases the probability of living abroad. In this way, as [Kuptsch \(2006\)](#) noted, student mobility becomes a form of global talent recruitment embedded within the globalisation of higher education. However, [Morano-Foadi \(2005, p. 133\)](#) argued that in Europe, the mobile highly-skilled are often driven by necessity more than choice, and the longer they are away the more complicated it is to return. For the case of Eastern Europe, [Pinger \(2010\)](#) shows that return migration is beneficial for economic development in the home country due to the repatriation of skills. Conceptualising return as a manifestation of transnationalism, I

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