

Mobility of Students in European higher education

Growth & innovation, panel, 14th Oct 2014, Bruegel

In this panel, the discussion focused especially on the opportunities and challenges of mobility for students in higher education as part of the broader issue of addressing the skills and employment gaps in Europe. The external speakers were, in order of appearance, Jordi Curell from DG EAC, Michael Gaebel from the European University Association, Marjut Santoni from EIF, and Elisabeth Gehrke from European Students' Union. The discussion was moderated by Karen Wilson.

In the last decade, education has become not only about the level of attainment, but also about the skills acquired. In this sense, an international experience such as Erasmus has the advantage of improving these capabilities, making them even more relevant to the current – very dynamic – job market. Indeed, employers nowadays are not only seeking job-specific competences but also international experience. It has also been found that people who have studied abroad are more creative and more likely to open their own enterprises. However, there are still some financial barriers to students' mobility.

There is also some scepticism about the reported increase in student mobility, as it could be partly due to better accounting methods.

For further improvements, we must turn to groups so far excluded, to certain "ignored" disciplines, and to the staff involved in the mobility. This concern was repeatedly addressed during the panel, with a special focus on inequality of access: the sample of international students is not representative of the whole population, due mostly to different socio-economic backgrounds and geographical unbalances. For this reason, it is important to work on, and eventually improve, perceptions of studying abroad. It has to be perceived as beneficial and as a high-quality educational attainment, so that lower-income students can also be incentivized to take part.

Additional concerns for student mobility could come from virtual mobility, which might be seen as a substitute, and by the so-called brain drain, especially for countries fearing that students going abroad would never come back.

In order to guarantee a wider participation, resources are being offered to those who could not otherwise afford to study abroad. The EIF is specifically intervening using EU structural funds, especially in those countries where it is harder to get loans. It provides a loan which is not income-contingent, with repayment starting after 12+12 months for everyone, and with a long-guaranteed scheme.

This is in line with the idea that Erasmus, which will soon become a world programme through the Erasmus+ program, and studying abroad in general, will be seen less as an elite program, but as an opportunity open to everyone.

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