

Student and Staff Mobility in European Higher Education Institutions during the First Years of the Bologna Process

Marios KASSINOPOULOS

Higher Technical Institute, P. O. Box 20423, 2152 Nicosia, Cyprus, marios.hti@cytanet.com.cy,

<http://www.hti.ac.cy>

KEYWORDS: *Bologna, education, mobility, obstacles, students*

ABSTRACT: *It is well known that the main goal of the Bologna Process signed by all Ministers of the European Union is the creation of a European Area of Higher Education (EAHE). In order to reach this target a great effort is undertaken to promote, among other activities, the mobility of Students, Academic Staff, Researchers and Administrative Staff. In this purpose some European programs like Socrates, Leonardo and Youth have been organized and financed by all member states of the EU.*

This paper analyses and comments the results of various studies in relation with mobility in European Higher Education Institutions (EHEI), during the first years of the implementation of the Bologna Process (BP). The main problems that have been identified are, the problem of imbalance between incoming and outgoing students in various countries, the difference of the rate of increase/decrease of mobility in the different countries and the existing obstacles of student mobility, which is not the same in all Institutions.

The paper, comments on the existing difficulties and proposes measures to be taken in order to overcome these problems.

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the main goals of the Bologna Process is the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which will promote the citizen mobility and employability around Europe. As a key way to reach this objective, emphasis is given, to the promotion of mobility of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff, and to the access to study and training opportunities and to related services [1]. This policy was reaffirmed in Prague in 2001. Besides the academic and professional benefits, which are the improvement of the quality of studies and the employability, the mobility of students and staff promotes also the sense of the common culture and the European identity, among the people of the academic society.

In order to take action with practical steps, for the promotion of this policy, the European Union supports financially various educational and research programs. The most important of them, directly related with mobility of students and staff, are the "Socrates", the "Leonardo" and the "Youth for Europe". Under the program "Socrates" there is the specialized program Erasmus, which is related to Higher Education. The two main objectives of Erasmus are the promotion of student and staff mobility and the improvement of quality in higher education. Leonardo is related to training of students and other people and Youth is related to a certain group of activities or projects between European countries involving young people.

This paper will examine the mobility of students and staff in European Higher Education Institutions (EHEI), during the first years of the Bologna Process and it will give more emphasis on the performance of mobility and the problems that have been encountered until now. Another result that will be discussed is the imbalance between Incoming and Outgoing students that exist in many Institutions and countries. The measures also taken by some Institutions and countries to overcome these problems will be examined and analyzed and suggestions for the policy to be followed in the future will be given.

2 EUROPEAN PROGRAMS RELATED TO STUDENT AND STAFF MOBILITY

The European Union in its effort to promote mobility, quality in education, training and research organizes and finances different programs. The most important program directly related to students and staff mobility, is the Socrates/Erasmus program. This program finances students to make a part of their studies, from 3 months to 1 year, to an Institution of another European country. The student is expected to follow regularly the lessons, take part aux examinations and return after to the home Institutions with grades and credits taken to the host Institution [2].

Similarly the same program finances Academic staff to visit and teach to a foreign European Institution. The teacher is expected to teach for a minimum of 8 hours per week for duration of 1 to 8 weeks. Administrative staff can also visit foreign Institutions in order to prepare and organize future student and staff exchanges.

Some other programs like Leonardo Da Vinci, finances mobility of students and staff involved in European Institutions common projects related to students training. The program Youth finances the mobility of young people involved in certain specific European projects and activities, which take place in various European countries. These are most important of the European programs promoting and financing directly mobility. There are also other programs related directly to Research, e-Learning, Life Long Learning and others which promote also mobility indirectly.

3 STUDENT MOBILITY

The great number of European educational programs offered in the academic community, as it was expected, helped mobility to mark a significant increase in the majority of the European countries and Higher Education Institutions (HEI). This increase was due also to the fact that the facilities and services provided by HEI for the promotion of students and staff mobility have been considerably improved. It should be added also that the experience gained by the first outgoing students and the information given by them later about the host country, Institution and the program in general, creates usually a positive feedback to prospective Erasmus students. Unfortunately there are no data available by European countries and HEI for the number of Incoming and Outgoing students. Nevertheless some figures provided by the European University Association (EUA) [3] shows some interesting results.

In about 75% of all HEI it was noted an increase of Outgoing students and in almost half of them the rate of increase was a significant one. This increase was noted in almost all the countries of Europe but especially in the Eastern countries. Only in Netherlands and UK it has been marked stability and even a decrease of outgoing students in some Institutions. The reasons for these negative results in UK are mainly the problem of language and the fact that in general UK universities use the traditional academic system with year subjects. They do not use the semester credit point system and this creates some academic difficulties regarding short-term (1 semester) studies abroad. It is noted also that in general UK students do not speak other languages.

Examining now the **Incoming** students we note that there is also an increase in almost of 75% of all HEI. Of course this increase is not distributed in the same countries and Institutions as the outgoing increase. The Western European Institutions have shown an important increase compared with the Eastern countries, in which the increase was limited to the three quarter of the HEI. The reasons for the attractiveness of Western Universities are mainly the high academic level of the Institutions, the facilities regarding accommodation and services for incoming students and the fact that some West European languages as English, French, German and Spanish are much better known than other languages. In Table 1 it can be seen a comparison between Incoming and Outgoing students in the 25 European Union member states. We can see that in Eastern European countries there are more Outgoing students than Incoming and in the rest there is a balance. It must be clarified that this comparison concerns the total of Higher Institutions per country.

Table 1: Rate of increase of Services to Erasmus Students

European Union member states	More Incoming students	More Outgoing students	Balance Incoming Outgoing students
United Kingdom, Ireland Malta	X		
Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia		X	
Austria, Finland, Italy, France, Portugal, Cyprus Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark, Ireland, Sweden, United Kingdom, Czech Republic			X

4 STAFF MOBILITY

The staff mobility performance is proportionally much better than student mobility. The main two reasons for this are related to the duration of the visit and the problem of language. The duration for staff mobility can be of short duration (1 or 2 weeks) and this creates fewer problems regarding the absences from their school and/or their family. The problem of language also is not so important. Very often teachers speak more than one language, especially English and so they have the possibility sometimes to teach in one of the language they know in countries where the language of instruction is different.

The experience has shown that until now in a majority of HEI there is a constant increase in teaching mobility. Although there are not available data from all countries and Institutions the increase of teacher mobility is estimated in 2003 to 8%. The countries receiving the majority of the incoming teachers are the 4 biggest European countries England, France, Germany and Spain. They receive the 52% of all teacher mobility. The only countries where the staff mobility has not shown an increase are UK and Ireland.

5 MAIN OBSTACLES OF MOBILITY

In the meeting, which was held in Prague in 2001, it was reaffirmed by ministers, that the objective of improving mobility of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff, is of the utmost importance and in this purpose they confirmed their commitment to pursue the removal of all obstacles concerning mobility.

Examining the important obstacles to mobility, it has been identified as the greatest obstacle, the insufficient mobility grant, which is provided to Erasmus students. It is well known that the mobility grant is provided to Erasmus students to cover additional expenses due to their transfer from home to a foreign university in a different country. It is expected also that in cases that this grant is not enough, the Institution should help students to find additional funding from governmental or other private sources. Unfortunately this is not applied in most cases. Only recently in certain countries, like Scandinavian countries, additional grant was provided to Erasmus students from governmental sources.

Another important obstacle to student mobility is the problem of language. Although the Erasmus program offers special grants for intensive language courses to Erasmus students, and certain Institutions organize such programs before the regular program of studies, the problem of language remains one of the greatest obstacles for student mobility. The experience has shown that Erasmus students who went abroad with insufficient knowledge of language had a bad academic performance. In order to overcome this problem many students who do not speak the language of instruction of the host institution go abroad and they do, in the foreign Institution, only their project. They do it under supervision of the local teachers using English or another language spoken by their supervisor. The fact that they do not follow lectures, and the project supervision can be done in one of the well-known languages, like English or French, makes the transfer of students possible without any significant problem. It must be added also

that in some countries, Scandinavian and central Europe (Finland, Hungary) some universities offer some of their programs in English in an effort to attract more foreign students. The results obtained from this practice for the time being, were very positive.

A third obstacle to mobility is the academic recognition of the studies followed abroad. Similar problems are the problems related to the syllabus and the number of hours taught in the host institutions for subjects to be transferred. The introduction and use of the ECTS credits has been proved very useful. It has been noted that more and more Institutions are using ECTS now. By 2005, it is expected that in all Institutions of the member countries of the EU, the use of the ECTS will be obligatory.

Other problems that may face mobile students are those related to the commitments that students have at home and the accommodation that they have to find in the foreign country. Many students are working part time at home in order to pay part of their studies and they do not want to lose their jobs. Find a part time job in the host country is most of the times impossible. Regarding accommodation and other practical problems, in some foreign institutions there are well-organized services and there are not significant problems. But in some Institutions these facilities are very limited, and there were cases where Erasmus students returned back home before completing their studies because of accommodation or other practical or social problems.

6 MEASURES TO IMPROVE MOBILITY

Although we do not have again exact data from all Institutions about measures to improve mobility, it is estimated that a great effort and many actions have been taken by a majority of HEI in most of the European countries, to remove obstacles to student and staff mobility.

In a majority of the Western European countries, there was an increase of the public funds provided for mobility. Regulations related with the residence of Incoming students have been improved in many countries. In most of the HEI there is an improvement in the organization of the International Offices, with an increase of the number of staff and funds available for foreign students. As a result it was noted an improvement in the welcome and orientation services in more than 75% of all HEI. In relation with the accommodation facilities, job opportunities and counseling services in general it was noted an improvement in almost 60% of all HEI. In addition to this an improvement has been noted in relation with the academic help provided to mobile students by the organization of intensive special language training and other tutorials. In Table 2 it can be seen the rate of increase of Services to Erasmus students.

Table 2: Rate of increase of Services to Erasmus Students per country

European Union member states	5 to 42 %	43 to 47 %	48 to 56 %	57 to 70 %
Netherlands, Belgium Luxembourg, Slovenia	X			
Austria, Denmark, Ireland, Sweden, United Kingdom Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania		X		
Finland, Italy, France, Portugal, Germany, Malta, Poland, Hungary, Cyprus			X	
Greece, Spain, Slovakia, Estonia				X

7 CONCLUSION

The creation of the EAHE is the main goal of the Bologna Process. A key way to reach this goal is the promotion of student and staff mobility among the 25 signatory member states of the EU. In this purpose certain European programs have been created and are monitored by the EU. These programs finance activities directly related with mobility. More precisely, these programs finance student exchanges between European Institutions and academic staff visits for teaching purposes in foreign Institutions.

The experience after the first years of the Bologna Declaration has shown that both student and staff mobility are in general in a constant increase. The rate of increase is not the same in all HEI and in all countries. Unfortunately there are not statistical data for all institutions and countries for the number of Incoming and Outgoing students and teachers. The existing data show that the rate of increase of Incoming students and staff in the Western European countries is higher than that of the East Europe. As it was mentioned before this is probably due to the fact that the HEI in the West Europe are considered of higher standard than those of the East countries and therefore are more attractive. Another reason is that the languages used in some West European countries are English, French, Spanish and German, which are more spoken than other languages in the rest of Europe. Regarding the teachers mobility it has been noted that there was a considerable increase in almost 70% of the 25 EU member states and in most of the HEI. This increase was expected because there are fewer problems for teaching mobility compared with student mobility.

In relation with the numbers of Incoming and Outgoing students it has been seen that although in the majority of the countries there is a balance between Incoming and outgoing students, in the majority of the HEI there is an imbalance. This is not surprising because some Institutions are more attractive for incoming students than others. Some Institutions also are better organized than others to help and facilitate Erasmus students to go abroad.

From data available it has been verified that certain countries are particularly attractive to incoming students. These are UK and Ireland. In these countries it has been noted a great imbalance between Incoming and Outgoing students and UK Institutions very often refuse to accept more Incoming students in an effort to limit this imbalance. This is due obviously to the reasons explained earlier, that English language is widely spoken in Europe and the UK Universities are considered of high academic standard. An additional reason for this imbalance is the fact also that English students avoid to go abroad for studies because of differences regarding the academic program and/or because of language problems.

As regards the obstacles for student mobility it has been noted that the main obstacle is the amount of the grant given to Erasmus students. It is considered as non-satisfactory. An effort must be taken by all Institutions to find additional funds from Public or private sources to support student mobility. These are the guidelines of the EU programs and fortunately some Institutions in West Europe follow this policy. More Institutions in all EU countries should apply the same policy otherwise only financially privileged students will have the possibility to participate in these student exchange activities.

The problem of academic recognition is in the way to be solved in a satisfactory level. The ECTS system has been introduced in many HEI and it is expected in the next few years to be implemented by law in almost all Institutions.

REFERENCES

- [1] "*The Bologna declaration*" Joint declaration of European Ministers of Education, Bologna, Italy, June 1999.
- [2] M KASSINOPOULOS, M DODRIDGE. "*Translation of credits and grades in student exchange programs: The experience of an Institution in cooperation with two others*". ICEER03, Valencia, Spain, 2003.
- [3] "*Trends 2003 Progress towards the European Higher Education Area*". European University Association (EUA). July 2003.