

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXCHANGE – MOTIVES, BENEFITS AND BARRIERS OF PARTICIPATION

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**Abstract:** Erasmus mobility is one of the most important manifestations of internationalization of education in Europe. The aim of the study is to ascertain the participants' motives and the benefits coming from this international exchange of students as well as to diversify the results with regard to gender. The article, in its theoretical part, characterizes the concept of internationalization of education, describes the factors motivating for educational mobility, the benefits and the barriers of participation. The empirical part contains own researches carried out on a group of 125 students from Polish and foreign universities, using the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) tool. It turns out that the main motivators to participate in student international education mobility is, among women, desire to travel as well as development of language skills. Men are mainly motivated by having fun and good time. Regardless of the research results it can be noticed that, generally, employers are more likely to decide to hire people who participated in and international student exchange, and the risk of long-term unemployment among graduates with international experience is lower by half than among graduates without such international experience. On the other hand, internationalization of education involves risks, including commercial profits, academic colonization and difficulties in providing high-quality education.

**Keywords:** internationalization of education, educational mobility, Erasmus program.

### 1. Introduction

The time of studies is a very important stage in a person's life; it is the time to acquire skills, knowledge and competencies necessary to build a professional career. Students want to explore the world and experience something special. It is worth using the time of higher education in the best possible way, taking advantage of the rich offer provided by universities which offer today's students a number of additional forms of self-realization, far exceeding the standard

studies at regular academies. Universities throughout Europe are intensively looking for new development opportunities, amongst others, through activities referred to as internationalization of education. Universities offering foreign scholarships have undertaken tasks of transforming a young student into a citizen of Europe and the World with extensive international and intercultural experience.

The Erasmus Program is one of the most important manifestations of internationalization of education in the world, expressed mainly by the increase in international mobility of students, lecturers and administrative staff as well as by preparation of the offer of classes in foreign languages.

Studying abroad brings undoubted benefits. Many students participate in international education exchange programs because they want to acquire knowledge about other cultures, get to know other teaching systems, language, or even because of pure curiosity and the desire to experience an adventure. The benefits of completing part of the studies abroad also increase the chances of such an exchange student on the labour market. Moreover, participation in student exchange programs shapes people's personality and worldview. The opportunity to study abroad, although very appealing, is also difficult in many aspects – both for people leaving Poland, and the foreign students visiting our country. Nevertheless, many students decide to go on a foreign scholarship.

The study consists of a theoretical and empirical part. The theoretical part includes the concept of internationalization of education, characterised on the basis of relevant literature as well as description of factors motivating for educational mobility, the benefits which foreign scholarship can bring and the barriers of participation in a student international exchange. The empirical part contains researches conducted using the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) tool on a sample of 125 students of Polish and foreign universities.

The aim of the work is to gain knowledge about the motives and the benefits of students who participate in international education exchange, and to diversify the participants with regard to the gender.

## **2. The notion of internationalization of education**

Internationalization of education can be understood as the process of integrating the international, intercultural and global dimensions with the purpose, functions and modes of operation of universities (Urbanikova, 2013, p. 2). In higher education, it can be noted that internationalization has always been more important than other spheres of social life. It operated in the sphere of intellectual exchange whose main domain is crossing borders, including national ones (Siwińska, 2013). Internationalization of higher education is the highest stage of international relations between universities, and is no longer perceived as an aim in itself, but

as a way to improve quality of education (Jibeen, and Khan, 2015). Internationalization is also acquisition and exchange of knowledge and experience (European Migration Network, 2015). A very important aspect of internationalization of education in Europe was the Bologna Process<sup>1</sup>.

In the literature, reasons for internationalization of education are considered as proactive and reactive (Duliniec, 2004, pp. 17-21). Proactive reasons for internationalization include: expectation of achieving profits from the provision of educational services to foreign students (e.g. commercial didactic programs, such as studies in a foreign language, MBA) and services of research-development nature (e.g. expert opinions, patents), possession of unique educational programs, ambitions of the university authorities, their international experience. The sources of reactive causes are in the environment, and are associated with reacting to external factors. Reactive causes of internationalization include the need to meet formal requirements related to internationalization of the sphere of didactic and scientific activity as well as the competitive situation in the higher education market (Pluta-Olearnik, 2014, p. 283).

A university that wants to be an important teaching and scientific centre must clearly indicate its place on the map of the European Higher Education Area. An important indicator of the clarity of this identification is the level of university internationalization (Martyniuk, 2011, p. 44). The degree of internationalization of universities manifests itself in the following criteria (Skibińska, 2018):

- number of foreign lecturers in relation to their total number,
- number of foreign researchers employed for at least 1 week,
- percentage of foreign students studying at university (degree mobility),
- percentage of students coming in as part of exchange programs (credit mobility),
- percentage of students going away to study (credit mobility),
- percentage of lecturers teaching abroad (teaching Staff mobilities),
- percentage of graduates receiving double/joint diplomas (in relation to the total number of graduates),
- percentage of graduates-foreigners (in relation to the total number of graduates),
- the amount of funds obtained for research from external foreign sponsors (in relation to the total amount obtained from external sponsors),
- the amount of funds raised through participation in international multilateral projects,
- number of employees dealing with internationalization in relation to the total number of administrative employees,
- percentage of graduates receiving double common diplomas (in relation to the total number of graduates),

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<sup>1</sup> The Bologna process – a program initiated by 29 ministers responsible for higher education by signing of the Bologna Declaration on June 19, 1999. The process was aimed at raising the prestige of European universities compared to American universities, adopting a system of comparable academic degrees and titles (Kraśniewski, 2009, p. 5).

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On a global scale, the process of internationalization of higher education began together with large migrations of Asian students in the late 1970s. United Kingdom, Australia and the United States have become world leaders in the internationalization of education due to the widespread use of the English language. In the continental Europe, this process began a little later. After 1989, movements related to the internationalization of education also began in Poland (Siwińska, 2013).

There are already 4 million people in the world studying abroad. By the year 2020, 7 million people will want to study in a foreign country. This market is estimated at 100 billion dollars (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2015).

### 3. The Erasmus Program and its main aspects

European students can benefit from many forms of mobility support among which the most popular one is the European Commission's Program called Erasmus (Sasin, 2014, p. 75). The Erasmus Program was launched in 1987 and at the beginning it concerned only student exchange. On the basis of its creation there was a belief in the value of internationalization of education and the need to develop a knowledge-based economy (Berg, 2014; Dincer, 2014). The name "Erasmus" refers to the name of a Dutch philosopher, theologian and humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536). Erasmus, like other eminent Renaissance figures, received education at many universities in various European countries, and his views on education were sated with deep humanism (Foundation for the Development of the Education System, 2018).

Until 2006, the Erasmus Program was a part of the Community *Socrates* program, and it is currently a part of the European Union's *Longlife Learning Program* (Sasin, 2014, p. 76). The Erasmus Program is a cooperation between universities of the European Union countries and it uses the ECTS system - European Credit Transfer System - to ensure a uniform way of assessing student's performance at all Universities, using the ECTS credit system (Gołuch, 2007).

The aim of the Erasmus Program is to develop and support inter-university exchange. Throughout Europe, nearly 2.3 million students have gone away for scholarships. The Erasmus Program currently involves over 4,000 universities from countries participating in the Program, including over 300 Polish universities. Scholarships have already been received by over 2 million students and almost 240,000 academic teachers. "Erasmus" confirmed that today it is

the most successful academic exchange program in the world (Kurdycka, 2013, p. 31). At present, depending on the country, the monthly scholarship amount is EUR 300, EUR 400 or EUR 500 in case of students and EUR 400, EUR 500 or EUR 600 in the case of interns (Zygierewicz, 2014, p. 5).

Poland joined the Erasmus Program in the academic year 1998/1999 (Foundation for the Development of the Education System, 2018) and, as part of the Program, about 180,000 Polish students have already left for scholarships. On the other hand nearly 100,000 foreign students came to Poland as part of the Erasmus Program (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2017).

Within 18 years, the number of Polish students deciding to go away for scholarship each year under the Erasmus Program, has increased more than tenfold: from 1400 to over 14,000. The number of students coming to Poland grew even faster. In 1998, only 220 foreign students chose Poland. Currently, the number of foreigners studying in Poland is 50 times larger and has already exceeded the number of 12,000 students annually (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2017).

Employees of universities have been going away to foreign universities under the Erasmus Program since 2000. Over 60,000 Poles have already benefited from this possibility. Most willingly, they develop their knowledge and competences at universities in Spain and Germany (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2017). Each year, about one and a half thousand Polish students go to each of these countries, while seven hundred people leave for internships. Italy is also popular and so is the United Kingdom, despite the situation related to Brexit, and Turkey as well. About 500 students and 500 interns go to the UK under the Erasmus Program. In the case of Turkey, 300 people go there to study, and about 100 people leave for internships there (Siekaj, 2016).

As destination for international scholarships, Poland seems to be of less interest. Under the Erasmus Program, ten times less people come to Poland than leave it. For example, the British people most often choose to study in the Netherlands and in the Scandinavian countries (Siekaj, 2016).

The next stage of the Erasmus Program development is the Erasmus+ Program. It is the European Union's program for education, training, youth and sport for the years 2014-2020 (European Council, 2017). In the years 2014-2020, the Erasmus+ Program will provide the possibility of going abroad for 4 million people, including 2 million students and 300 thousand university employees. In addition, the Program will finance exchanges with the participation of non-European partner countries for 135,000 students and academics. "Erasmus+" is even more accessible thanks to increased language support and more flexible regulations as well as support for people with special needs, people coming from societies being in unfavourable situation, or geographically remote regions (European Commission, 2014).

The results of the annual research on the effects of the Erasmus Program are presented by the European Commissioner for Education, Culture and Multilingualism (Szczerbiak, 2014).

The results of the study on the effects of the Erasmus Program are very significant in the context of high level of unemployment among young people in the European Union. The message is clear: if you study or if you do an internship abroad, your chances of finding a job will increase (European Commission, 2014).

The results of a research organized by the international organization called Erasmus Student Network (ESN), provide a general image of foreign students studying in Poland. According to the research, the average age of the respondents was 23.5 years. Women represent 60% of respondents and men – 40%. Vast majority of the students come from Western European countries, i.e. ‘old’ EU countries (94%). The average length of stay in Poland for a student of the Erasmus Program was 6.5 months. The most popular city is Kraków (38%) followed by Warsaw (20%), and, subsequently, by Wrocław (9%). While staying in Poland, the students take part in classes at the universities. Before coming for scholarships, majority of students assessed their knowledge of the Polish language as null. Two groups were distinguished among the students: the ones with an academic approach to their journey and those who have non-academic approach. The latter group is bigger. Interestingly, despite the fact that no one chose ‘development of own personality’ from the provided options as the reason for going abroad, the students mentioned that aspect as the most important personal advantage deriving from such exchange.

The fields of studies most often represented by foreign students are: marketing and management (28%), technical sciences (17%) and social sciences (11%). In comparison with the European results, the percentage of people studying Polish language is low among foreign scholarship participants of Erasmus in Poland which is probably caused by low popularity of the Polish language. The foreign students were more satisfied with their stay in our country than with studying (Krupnik, and Krzaklewska, 2005).

#### **4. Motives, benefits and barriers resulting from international learning mobility**

The motives by which the students applying for a journey abroad are driven are important for the final learning outcome of education abroad. Strength and persistence of motives depend largely on the relationship and the attitude of an adult student with learning, his or her perseverance in learning, the ability to make sacrifices, patience in overcoming difficulties (Wawrzyniak, and Świdorska, 2011, pp. 53-66).

The basic types of motivation which the participants of international exchange programs are driven by are as follows (Sasin, 2014, p. 79; Doliński, Łukaszewski, 2002, pp. 469-491):

- hedonistic – associated with the desire to be entertained, to play, experience adventure, make casual social contacts and even sexual encounters,
- motivation of exerting influence – related to the desire to become independent, live on one's own, but also to the desire to promote Polish culture among peers from other countries, and to act as its representative,
- epistemic – associated with the desire to know – four types of it were distinguished here:
  - a) epistemic motivation in the field of study – the desire to improve knowledge and skills within the field of study, learn about scientific literature not available in Poland, collect materials or carry out research for theses,
  - b) epistemic motivation in the field of learning a foreign language – the desire to improve foreign language skills in the natural environment,
  - c) epistemic motivation within the scope of future professional work – the desire to gain experience which, in the future, may facilitate finding a satisfying job,
  - d) epistemic motivation in the field of another culture – the desire to get to know a foreign country in terms of culture (the habits, the mentality of its residents), geography (the nature, the monuments) and educational (the academic conditions, the educational system).

Individual types of motivation can occur together, although usually one of them is dominant.

The study on motivation in students participating in the Erasmus Program was part of an analysis of social support, carried out using psychological methods in a group of 2,000 people of different nationalities in the year 2009. Motivation to study or to do an internship abroad in a specific place is diverse, and it is often caused by several reasons: for 45% people knowledge of the local language is important; 39% apply for the journey because of their interest in culture; 12% of people are driven by good experiences of colleagues who have already been in a given country; 9% – climatic conditions; 11% did not pass the recruitment process for a scholarship in another country; 10% of scholars chose a country because they had friends in the country of the scholarship; another 10% of the decisions are without any reflection. The scholarship holders indicate the following as the most important reasons for the decision to study abroad: the desire to learn something new (30%); gaining knowledge about another culture (20%); visiting their favourite country (10%); passion for travelling (10%); possibility of including the scholarship in the Curriculum Vitae (8.5%); the desire to have fun (3%). The company of other international students and compatriots at a scholarship brings more satisfaction from studying abroad than contacts with the local students – however not as much (Biłas-Henne, 2011, pp. 171-189).

International education mobility is a chance for students to learn about new cultures, languages, and is an opportunity to study or work in an international environment. According to the Bologna experts, participation in education mobility (Foundation for the Development of the Education System, 2018):

- broadens knowledge on a given discipline in a different education system, another cultural environment and using a different language,
- allows to build awareness of the international dimension and character of knowledge,
- develops language competences in a language other than the native language,
- promotes development of critical thinking and independent learning skills,
- encourages development of resourcefulness, self-confidence and adaptation skills,
- teaches respect and understanding of cultural diversity,
- prepares for work in a multicultural environment and socially different conditions.

The tests for scholars conducted before the scholarship journey and the ones completed right after returning from it prove that students come back not only more confident, but also more tolerant towards other cultures, they are able to solve problems faster, adapt to new situations, and they have greater organizational skills. At the same time, these are the personality features that most employers value the most. The risk of long-term unemployment among graduates with international experience is lower by half than in the case of graduates who did not study abroad. It was also shown that 64% of employers entrust more responsibilities to employees with international experience which translates into bigger chances of promotion (Szczerbiak, 2014).

According to the European Commission, more than one-third of the program's scholarship holders receive job offers from companies at which they did internships. Graduates with international experience also show higher degree of entrepreneurship than their peers studying in the country: 10% of people set up their own businesses, and more than three out of four have such plans or consider such an option. Five years after graduation, the unemployment rate among people who studied abroad is 23% lower.

It can be concluded from the research that 92% of employers making decisions about employment prefer to choose people with personality traits perfected by the Erasmus program, such as: tolerance, trust, ability to solve problems, curiosity, knowledge of own strengths/weaknesses. Tests carried out before and after scholarships show that these personality traits are revealed more strongly before students leave for the exchange program than after their return. This difference increases by an average of 42% in comparison with other students (European Commission, 2014).

However, the Erasmus Program brings not only benefits but also problems, and even some risk. This is noticeable already during the recruitment stage. Willingness to grant the maximum number of scholarships available, and the use of all financial resources allocated to a given university sometimes leads to unjustified easing of requirements for candidates and excessive simplification of the recruitment procedures. Such actions turn against students because some of them go to countries in which they do not know the language well enough to study there. Unfortunately, the awareness of the need to be fluent in a foreign language is not always sufficient among students; some think that "somehow it will be OK", "in a foreign country



learning is faster", etc. The criteria for recruitment, established by the National Agency of the Lifelong Learning Program, have not been formulated precisely (Guide to the university coordinator of the Erasmus program, 2011).

The choice of a foreign university sometimes is made without any thought given to it either. Sometimes the climate of a given country turns out to be the decisive factor. Some candidates for the scholarship journeys do not even try to familiarize with the foreign study program and the activities offered, not to mention the knowledge about the teacher's profiles, their scientific achievements, the library resources, etc. Such randomness means that if the wrong choice of university is not corrected during recruitment (it is not always possible) – students may have problems with adapting to the relevant study program abroad and, therefore, with passing the semester after returning to Poland.

Although education internationalization has many positive aspects for higher education, there is a serious risk associated with this multidimensional and growing phenomenon, including commercial profits, academic colonization and difficulties in providing high quality of education (Jibeen, and Khan, 2015).

## **5. Motivations and benefits resulting from student international exchange according to own research**

The subject of the research in this study is to determine the motives and the benefits of international exchange of students, and the objective is to identify these motives and advantages resulting from educational mobility as well as to diversify results with regard to gender.

The above aim was formulated in the following research questions:

- 1) Students from what types of universities and faculties usually decide to take part in an international exchange?
- 2) What are the reasons for choosing a university, country or city where they will study during the exchange?
- 3) What motivates students to go for an education exchange?
- 4) What benefits does educational mobility bring to students?
- 5) Which countries are most often chosen by students as their place of study?
- 6) Do the students who participate in international exchange plan to tie their future with the country in which they decided to study?

Diagnostic poll method, using a survey technique, was used in the study as a research method. The research was carried out in the period from February to May 2017, and 125 students who studied at various faculties at many Polish and foreign universities took part in it.

## 6. Conclusions

Among students who decided to go for an international education exchange, most study at Universities and Economic Academies in the case of women. Men who benefitted from an education exchange most often study at Polytechnics or the Academies of Physical Education. In addition, men who decided to choose educational mobility, study the technical and sports-related fields more often than females. In turn, women more often study the fields related to business and management as well as foreign languages and philologies.

When choosing a university, participants of a student exchange pay much attention to the location of a given university. This is an important factor for  $\frac{3}{4}$  women and more than half of the men. The prestige of a place and the language used are also important. Women choose the University because of the similar educational offer more often than men, while men pay most attention to the future annotation in their Curriculum Vitae. When choosing a city or country, women are more interested in the climate and geographic location of a given place, and men pay heed to language and culture of the destination place. Moreover, women pay more attention than men to the cost of living in a given place, and, in addition, they manage their scholarships better. Opinions about destinations are important for one third of the participants, both females and males.

Among women who decided to take part in international education exchange, the main motives for participation are the desire to travel and to improve foreign language skills. Men are motivated mainly by fun, having good time, parties as well as the desire to impress the future employer. Generally, one out of three exchange participants wants to experience an adventure.

Female students see the benefits of participating in an international education exchange in terms of gaining experience by living in another country more often than males do, and they appreciate the network of contacts resulting from studying abroad more. For men, the possibility to learn the language of a given country is a bigger advantage. In addition, both men and women see a great advantage in improving their foreign language skills, but greater improvement in foreign language skills after a scholarship is noticeable in the case of men.

It can be noticed that men more often choose Germany as the country where they want to study during their education exchange. In turn, women are more likely to travel to Italy, France and Spain.

Women want to tie their future with the country where they studied during the education exchange more often than men.

## 7. Summary

In the course of the conducted research, it was noticed that, among the participants of international education exchanges, women more often study at Universities, and the fields of their study majors are in particular related to business and management as well as foreign languages and philologies. Men who take part in foreign scholarships are usually students of Universities of Technology, and they mainly study technical field majors.

It can be stated that students who decided to participate in international education exchanges are guided by both hedonistic and epistemic motivation, as noted by Sasin (2014). However, men are motivated by hedonistic motivation, namely having a good time, more than women.

The most important motives for participation in student international exchanges are, for women, the desire to travel and improve their foreign language skills. Men are motivated mainly by fun, parties and the need to impress the future employer.

One third of the students participate in education mobility because they want to experience an adventure. Recommendations of other students are also important, and opinion of others motivates every third respondent. This is also confirmed by the results of studies by Biłas-Henne (2011).

One of the main benefits of participating in international education exchanges is gaining valuable experience, both by living in another country and by studying outside of home university. There is no doubt that one of the main benefits is the possibility to improve foreign language skills, and get an advantage in finding a future job. These conclusions are confirmed by studies on the effects of the Erasmus Program of the European Commission (2014) and by Sasin (2014). Moreover, the network of contacts that were gained during the student exchange is also an important benefit. It was also noticed by Chelkowska (2005).

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that women manage their scholarship funds allocated from the European Union in a better way, and in the case of women, more often than in the case of men, the amount of the scholarship allows them to cover the costs of living in a given country. Besides, women who travel abroad for a scholarship under the Erasmus Program rated the assets situation of their household higher. This may mean that women who decided to take part in international student exchanges are in better financial situation than men.

In conclusion, the authors want to emphasise that the recruitment process for participants in student international exchange should be more systematized and should not give the universities full freedom in granting admission for foreign scholarship.

Furthermore, verification of language competences of a potential scholarship holder should be carried out carefully. It often happens that students who have successfully passed the language verification process with regard to language in which they will study abroad, encounter a language barrier during academic classes. Students show shortcomings in using professional language, characteristic for particular fields of study.

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