Europe: The Great Divide
Imbalances in Mobility and Higher Education Development

By Hanneke Teekens

With the introduction of the Erasmus Program in 1987, student mobility in Europe has been a tremendous success. Of all the European programs, Erasmus stands out for its positive effects despite the fact that one of its goals of having 10 percent of all European students studying in another country in the region was never accomplished.

The Bologna Process, now adopted by 47 countries, was developed to further enhance European higher education and to facilitate student mobility by creating an open European space for higher education and research (EHEA). The development of transferable credit points (ECTS) earned at one university and recognized at another was a major step forward. In effect, the Bologna Process has impacted degree mobility more than exchanges in Erasmus.

An increasing number of European students are enrolled in full degree programs outside their own country and the recognition of credits and degrees is common place (although there is still room for important improvement). The results of Bologna are not restricted to mobility issues only. Various projects and programs focus on educational system innovation and curriculum design to make European programs more attractive. The Tuning Project, for example, aims to develop internationally transparent descriptors for learning outcomes to support joint curriculum development. The main goal is to increase the number of double degrees, and the concept is emulated in various other parts of the world. Overall, it could be stated that harmonization and integration of higher education in Europe has made big steps forward over the last 15 years. Moreover, Europe continues to be the most desired study destination. On a global scale, the EHEA accounts for 46 percent of all student mobility worldwide.

But what do these figures mean? A closer look shows wide discrepancies between countries and regions. In the first place, it is clear that international study in Europe is dominated by mobility among European countries themselves. More than 83 percent of mobile students in EHEA go to a country within this area, compared to only 17 percent that make the choice to study elsewhere. On top of that, many students go to a neighboring country. One could argue that in Europe mobility is highly regional and less “international” than in many other parts of the world, especially when EHEA claims that it is “one” area for higher education. But this is certainly not the reality of a widely diverse region. Moreover, the 47 countries of EHEA are not synonymous with the 28 countries that currently make up the European Union. Special agreements within the EU make it much easier (and cheaper) for students from the EU to study in another EU country. It is more difficult (and more expensive) for students from EHEA member states like Azerbaijan, Montenegro, or the Russian Republic to study in the EU. By and large, mobility in Europe means within the European Union rather than in EHEA. Most students go to countries like the United Kingdom, Austria, Denmark, France, Spain, and the Netherlands. They have become net importing countries, sending far fewer students abroad than they receive.
Countries like Germany, Finland, Sweden, Belgium, and Italy are also net importers, but they send almost as many students as they receive. Countries like Portugal, Greece, Malta, Iceland, and Cyprus see a much larger percentage of students leave than they receive. In fact, in Greece, there is a very serious and growing brain drain. Overall, there is a flow from small countries to bigger ones, and countries in northern Europe profit much more than those in the southern and eastern part.

Outbound mobility in Europe accounts for 24 percent of mobile students. Again, we have to keep in mind that most of these students will remain in EHEA, but it does make European students far more mobile than their peers in the Americas (10 percent), Africa (12 percent) or Australia (1 percent). Only students from Asia surpass these figures with a percentage of 54, topped by students from China. The total number of mobile students is likely to have approached 5 million in 2014. That is a rapid increase when we realize that only four years ago this number amounted to 3 million students. Over the last few years the rates have not really shifted, in spite of rising numbers, and we have not seen radical trend breeches in the direction of student flows. Worldwide, the large numbers of international mobile students have greatly influenced higher education systems. But it is also important to realize that for more than three decades, despite sharp increases in numbers, the actual percentage of mobile students has not really changed. It remains around 2 percent. This is due to the fact that total enrollment in the world has sharply increased. It also means that mobility has very diverse effects in various countries.

What are some of the reasons behind the mobility imbalance in Europe? Three of the largest factors are tradition, language, and lifestyle. When we consider the geographical distribution of student mobility in Europe, we see that countries with well-developed higher education systems and high-ranking universities attract the majority of students. As it turns out, these countries have long-standing international relations, existing well before the introduction of Bologna and European education policies. The use of ECTS and joint degrees have greatly supported old networks and existing practice. This has made countries that were already enjoying a tradition in international cooperation leap ahead of their neighbors, as in the case of Germany and France. In other words, those countries with strong and old international ties have profited much more from Bologna than countries that had to make a new start, such as Hungary and Poland.

Language is increasingly a driving force. The United Kingdom tops the bill by far, combining a long tradition in the Commonwealth with the provision of education in the most preferred language: English. Even countries like France, Germany, and Spain, home to world languages, have slowly started to provide more and more courses in English. In the Netherlands, most graduate work is done in English, and students enjoy an international climate at their home campus, perhaps explaining why the Dutch are less mobile. Austria attracts most of its international students from other German-speaking nations, and Spain hosts the largest number of Latin American students. In France, French-speaking students from Africa represent the largest group. Students like to study where they are familiar with the language or in places where English is common. Marketing strategies outside the English-speaking countries in Europe lure students from abroad with a wide range of programs offered in English.

But it is not English language alone that makes programs attractive. The mode of delivery, classroom culture, and extracurricular activities are also factors. Academic freedom can often be greater than in many students’ countries of origin, and the chance to receive work experience outside of the classroom is a huge draw. International students increasingly seek jobs or internships as part of their study program, and countries with a high GDP are more likely to provide these opportunities.

Students are also basing their decision on lifestyle. Large urban areas such as London, Berlin, Barcelona, and Amsterdam attract students in search of the options and pace of metropolitan living, whereas each city’s country does not factor into the decision as much. We see that within Europe, certain cities are dominating the field.
Many believe that European policy instruments on higher education have had an important impact. Compared to only 15 years ago, when the Sorbonne Declaration set the stage, the European landscape has changed dramatically. Countries, and especially metropolitan areas with high living standards and highly ranked universities, attract the majority of international talent in education and research. Other areas with less favorable conditions lose ground and are less involved in exchanges, English-taught programs, and innovative modes of delivery. Instead of “one” Europe, we see the development of increasing disparity in provision, quality, and international collaboration in higher education.

Another reason for concern is the rise of patriotic parties seen during the May 2014 elections for the European Parliament. Apprehension over the instability of some economies, foremost Greece, and the financial crisis in general has made many Europeans less open to further European cooperation. Separatist movements, like in Scotland and Catalonia, focus on local issues over continental interests. The widening gap in Europe between countries with economic growth and those who fall behind is not a fertile ground for collaboration, neither in economic terms nor in higher education.

In 2014, we commemorated the outbreak of the First World War, or the Great War as they say in many countries. And 2015 marks 70 years since the even more devastating Second World War blasted the continent into rubble. The origin of the “European Idea” and the first European programs in education were based on the notion of learning for peace. We have come a long way in Europe, but the values of unity in diversity, so essential for the European programs, will remain under threat if the gap between European countries becomes too large to negotiate in a constructive way. It is therefore extremely important to protect the influence of educational collaboration as a means of diplomacy for peace and development for all Europeans.

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