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The European Union and international student mobility

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Abstract

This paper will consider the objectives of the European Union's (EU) mobility programmes through the experiences of international students, European and non-European, at several New Zealand universities, the University of Oxford and the Charles University in Prague. It is based on the preliminary findings of my PhD thesis titled: *The Internationalisation of Universities and International Student Mobility*, which looks at the motives, experiences and perceptions of international students with focus on knowledge transfer, networking and the intercultural competencies of students.

The European Union is an important global player in the internationalisation of higher education and its main motives in this regard are socio-economic, followed by political, academic and cultural. International student mobility is perhaps the most visible manifestation of internationalisation. Ideally and amongst others, the Union's student exchange programmes seek to develop a pool of: well qualified, open minded and internationally experienced individuals.

The experience of the international students engaged in my study correlate with these objectives, most of all, they show a process of personal development of individuals, often very specific. Interaction with fellow students and locals play an important part in their experiences, which serve as a pool of ideas to improve some elements of student exchanges.

Internationalisation of higher education

Internationalisation is a concept increasingly used also in education and research institutions in the context of globalization. Jane Knight defines internationalisation in regards to higher education as a "process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institutions."¹ Globalisation and internationalisation are related, globalisation being a catalyst and internationalisation an

¹ Jane Knight, "Internationalisation of higher education: a conceptual framework," in *Internationalisation of higher education in Asia Pacific countries*, ed. Jane Knight and Hans de Wit (Amsterdam: European Association for International Education, 1997), 8.

active response, since globalisation describes the free “flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values, ideas”² with different effects on different countries, owing to each nation’s unique history and culture. Thus internationalisation can be also applied on other actors, not merely on educational or research institutions. National governments can have a strategy for internationalisation as well as regional entities such as the EU.

The internationalisation of higher education can be seen as one of the responses of a country to globalisation with respect to the nation’s individuality based on history, culture, resources and other factors. Factors influencing the pace and form of internationalisation should according to Knight prevent homogenisation. This is because within internationalisation the integration of the intercultural, not only international elements, should take into consideration the unique characteristics of a country, including ethnic and minority groups. There are various motivations for internationalisation; Knight suggests four rationales, the political, economic, academic, and cultural and societal rationales which all interact between each other.³

International student mobility

In line with Knight’s rationales for internationalisation, Altbach recognises the complexity of factors influencing foreign student policy – a mixture of political, ideological, economic and educational issues. They become the drivers of student mobility and in this context Altbach distinguishes the push and pull factors of individuals’ decision making. Push factors concern the home countries and account for: the availability of scholarships for study abroad; poor-quality educational facilities; lack of research facilities; lack of appropriate educational facilities and/or failure to gain admission to local institution(s); politically uncongenial situation; enhanced value (in the marketplace) of a foreign degree; discrimination against minorities; and recognition of the inadequacy of existing forms of traditional education.

² Jane Knight, “Internationalisation of higher education: a conceptual framework,” in *Internationalisation of higher education in Asia Pacific countries*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

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Pull factors relate to host countries and follow: availability of scholarships to international students; good-quality education; availability of advanced research facilities; availability of appropriate educational facilities with likely offer of admission; congenial political situation; congenial socioeconomic and political environment; and opportunity for a general international life experience.⁴

International student mobility is one of the most explicit tools of internationalisation. Students' motivations to study abroad are believed to be a mixture of factors based on individual calculations.⁵ Several concepts capture this notion of individuality in terms of international student mobility, for example King's typologies of individual migration,⁶ Williams *et al.*'s "enfolded mobility,"⁷ Becks' concept of "elective do-it-yourself biographies,"⁸ Murphy-Lejeune's "new strangers."⁹ International students can also be thought

⁴ Philip G. Altbach, *Comparative higher education: knowledge, the university and development* (Greenwich, Conn.: Ablex Pub. Corp., 1998), 172-173.

Philip G. Altbach, "Comparative higher education: knowledge, the university and development," in *Globalization of higher education and cross-border student mobility*, N.V. Varghese, UNESCO – IIEP, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001579/157989e.pdf> (December 7, 2009).

⁵ Philip G. Altbach, Liz Reisberg and Laura E. Rumbley, *Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution - Executive Summary: A Report Prepared for the UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education*, UNESCO, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001831/183168e.pdf> (December 7, 2009). Philip G. Altbach, "Comparative higher education: knowledge, the university and development," (December 7, 2009).

⁶ Russell King, "Towards a New Map of European Migration," *International Journal of Population Geography* 8, 89-106, (2002), 89.

⁷ Allan M. Williams, Natalia Chaban and Martin Holland, "The circular international migration of New Zealand: enfolded mobilities and relational places," in *International Migration and Knowledge*, ed. Allan Williams and Vladimir Balaz (London: Routledge, 2008), 14, 24.

⁸ Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, "Individualisation," (London: Sage, 2002) quoted in Allan Findlay and others, *Ever reluctant Europeans: The changing geographies of UK students studying and working abroad*, *European Urban and Regional Studies* 13(4): 291-318 (2006), 293, <http://eur.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/13/4/291> (November 18, 2009).

⁹ Elizabeth Murphy-Lejeune, *Student Mobility and Narrative in Europe: The New Strangers* (London: Routledge, 2002). http://books.google.co.nz/books?id=AaM7vVbf0rWC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false (May 15, 2012).

of as being an element of “highly skilled migration,”¹⁰ “youth mobility cultures and the consumption geographies”¹¹ and the concept of transnationalism.¹²

European Union and the internationalisation of higher education

Educational and research institutions, governments and the EU, are motivated and influenced by internationalisation and they can become actors of internationalisation. Individuals are being affected by the internationalising process of institutions or governments and vice versa they impact on their educational institution, either economically (student fees), academically (research cooperation), politically (representing their country) and socio-culturally (friendships).

The education policies in the EU are decided by Member States, but they cooperate together in the field of higher education by setting joint goals and sharing best practices with the vision of the Europe of knowledge society. Top-quality education and training is believed to ensure Europe’s effective competitiveness in the globalised economy by contributing to the

¹⁰ Sami Mahroum, *Highly skilled globetrotters: mapping the international migration of human capital*, R&D Management 30, no. 1: 23-31(2000), 24.

¹¹ Allan Findlay and others, “Ever Reluctant Europeans: The Changing Geographies of UK Students Studying and Working Abroad,” *European Urban and Regional Studies* 13(4): 291–318.

¹² Thomas Faist, “The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces,” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) quoted in Russel King, *Towards a New Map of European Migration*, *International Journal of Population Geography* 8: 89-106 (2002), 92.

Ludger Pries, “Migration and Transnational Social Spaces,” (Ashgate: Aldershot, 1999) quoted in Russel King, *Towards a New Map of European Migration*, *International Journal of Population Geography* 8: 89-106 (2002), 92.

Alejandro Portes, Luis E. Guarnizo and Patricia Landolt, “The study of transnationalism: pitfalls and promise of an emergent research field,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22 (2): 217-237 (1999) quoted in Russel King, *Towards a New Map of European Migration*, *International Journal of Population Geography* 8: 89-106 (2002), 92.

Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Szanton-Blanc, “From immigrant to transmigrant: theorizing transnational migration,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 68: 48-63 (1995) quoted in Russel King, *Towards a New Map of European Migration*, *International Journal of Population Geography* 8: 89-106 (2002), 92.

Terra Gargano, “(Re)conceptualizing International Student Mobility: the potential of transnational social fields,” *Journal of Studies in International Education* 13, no.3 (2009): 332.

rise of a highly qualified and adaptable population, as well as to the strengthening of social cohesion and active citizenship, as mobility and cooperation are promoted.¹³

The articles 165 – 166 guide the EU's competencies in the area of education, vocational training, youth and sport.¹⁴ In all cases, the Union's role is stated explicitly only to encourage, support, supplement and contribute to the actions of the Member States. The EU acts by the European Parliament and the Council (consulting the Economic and Social

¹³ "Education, Training, Youth – Building a dynamic future," *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, http://europa.eu/pol/educ/index_en.htm (May 30, 2012).

"Summaries of legislation," *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/index_en.htm (May 30, 2012).

¹⁴ Article 165
(ex Article 149 TEC)

1. The Union shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity. The Union shall contribute to the promotion of European sporting issues, while taking account of the specific nature of sport, its structures based on voluntary activity and its social and educational function.

2. Union action shall be aimed at:

- developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States,
- encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study,
- promoting cooperation between educational establishments,
- developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the Member States,
- encouraging the development of youth exchanges and of exchanges of socio-educational instructors, and encouraging the participation of young people in the democratic life in Europe,
- encouraging the development of distance education,
- developing the European dimension in sport, by promoting fairness and openness in sporting competitions and cooperation between bodies responsible for sports, and by protecting the physical and moral integrity of sportsmen and sportswomen, especially the youngest sportsmen and sportswomen.

3. The Union and the Member States shall foster cooperation with third countries and the competent international organisations in the field of education and sport, in particular the Council of Europe.

4. In order to contribute to the achievement of the objectives referred to in this Article:

- the European Parliament and the Council, acting in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure, after consulting the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, shall adopt incentive measures, excluding any harmonisation of the laws and regulations of the Member States,
- the Council, on a proposal from the Commission, shall adopt recommendations.

Committee and the Committee of the Regions) on proposals from the Commission, excluding any law harmonisations and regulations.¹⁵

Based on the wording of the articles 165 - 166 the Union's rationale to internationalise higher education are economic, political, academic and socio-cultural, although they can be narrowed down to "socio-economic and political."¹⁶ Furthermore, the article sets the Union and the Member states to "foster cooperation with third countries."¹⁷ Thus the EU can be also seen as a driver of internationalisation. As mentioned earlier, international students are an important part in internationalisation, because they embody its rationales, for example, student fees represent the economic rationale or students can help to integrate the international and intercultural element into universities, both formal and informal.

The Commission's Directorate General of Education and Culture (EAC) is responsible for the area of higher education. The main areas of the Union's work are the: education and training, youth, culture, citizenship and media. Education is a part of several main EU objectives, such as the Lisbon strategy, which underwent modifications in reaction to the Union's achievements and challenges. The main intention of the renewed Lisbon strategy is to deliver Europe a "prosperous, fair and environmentally sustainable future,"¹⁸ with focus on growth and employment. Globalisation and sustainable development contextualise the efforts of the EU, and knowledge and innovation were defined as one of the objectives for sustainable development as they facilitate skills upgrading, which ensures

¹⁵ "Consolidated version of the Treaty establishing the European Community," *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/JOHtml.do?uri=OJ:C:2010:083:SOM:EN:HTML> (May 30, 2012).

¹⁶ Elizabeth Murphy-Lejeune, *Student Mobility and Narrative in Europe: The New Strangers* (London: Routledge, 2002), 6.

¹⁷ "Consolidated version of the Treaty establishing the European Community," *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/JOHtml.do?uri=OJ:C:2010:083:SOM:EN:HTML> (May 30, 2012).

¹⁸ "General Report on the Activities of the European Union," *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, (January 10, 2009).

"Communication to the spring European Council – working together for growth and jobs: a new start for the Lisbon Strategy," *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, <http://europa.eu.int/growthandjobs/> (December 3, 2009).

"Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs: towards a green and innovative economy," *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union* http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/index_en.htm (January 11, 2010).

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better employment and thus growth.¹⁹ Therefore, education and training are pivotal to economic and social change.²⁰ This principle is derived from the so called knowledge triangle – education, research and innovation, which is believed to play a key role in boosting jobs and growth. The initial Lisbon strategy aimed to establish the Union as the most competitive and knowledgeable economy by 2010, but global competition proved to be fierce.

The Europe 2020 strategy, considers education together with employment, innovation, climate/energy and social inclusion one of its five ambitious objectives. It is acknowledged that investment in quality education, lifelong learning and training is important for reaching the growth objectives.²¹ In the case of the Youth on the move, these account for: help in study abroad for students and trainees, better equipping people for the job market, improving the performance and international attractiveness of European universities and lifting the levels of education and training.²² Education and Training 2020 seeks to strengthen cooperation between the EU and its Member States. It is a follow up to the Education and Training 2010. The priority of this approach is lifelong learning. It aims to complement and detail the Europe 2020 objectives. These aims are: to make lifelong learning and mobility a reality; improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; and enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.²³

¹⁹ “General Report on the Activities of the European Union,” *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, (January 10, 2009).

“COM(2008) 868 final: COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS - New Skills for New Jobs Anticipating and matching labour market and skills needs, *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/com868_en.pdf (January 7, 2010).

²⁰ “2008 joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the ‘Education and Training 2010’ work programme - ‘Delivering lifelong learning for knowledge, creativity and innovation’ - (2008/C 86/01),” *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:086:0001:0031:EN:PDF> (January 7, 2010).

²¹ “General report on EU activities – EU policies for growth – Europe 2020,” *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, http://europa.eu/generalreport/pdf/rg2011_en.pdf (May 30, 2012).

²² “Europe 2020 – smart growth,” *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/priorities/smart-growth/index_en.htm (May 30, 2012).

²³ “Strategic framework for education and training,” *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/framework_en.htm (May 30, 2012).

Turning to the actual programmes which support student mobility, the EU with its Erasmus student exchange has a history of over 20 years, 2.2 million students and 33 countries. The new Erasmus for All Programme was proposed recently. This would unite the EU international schemes with a limit of up to 5 million places (study, volunteering, training...) between 2014 and 2020.²⁴ As far as the objectives of the student mobility are concerned, they aim:

- “To enable students to benefit educationally, linguistically and culturally from the experience of learning in other European countries;
- To promote co-operation between institutions and to enrich the educational environment of host institutions;
- To contribute to the development of a pool of well-qualified, open-minded and internationally experienced young people as future professionals.”²⁵

Based on the preliminary findings of my study, the experiences of international students’ correlates with previously mentioned objectives. Students acknowledge that above all, they benefit culturally and educationally from their studies abroad. They perceive themselves as an asset to the host institutions and societies, again mainly because of the cultural and social benefits they represent. Students mature and grow as individuals while abroad, primarily due to experiences which make them more open minded internationally. As for the well-qualified element of the EU objective, knowledge and skills acquired during their studies are valued equally for their intercultural as well as academic character. Despite the students’ overwhelmingly optimistic perceptions of their international study experiences, they detail the many obstacles in their lives abroad. These can potentially challenge the positive experiences of international students both academically and socially.

²⁴ “Erasmus for all – Investing in Europe’s education, training and youth,” *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus-for-all/index_en.htm (May 30, 2012).

²⁵ “Erasmus student mobility for studies,” *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/study_en.htm (May 30, 2012).

“Education and training – ERASMUS Student Mobility for Studies,” *EUROPA – Gateway to the European Union*, http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/study_en.htm (June 2, 2012).

Methodology

The methodology of this study consist of anonymous online surveys, semi structured interviews and so far nine follow up online surveys with international students at six New Zealand Universities, the University of Oxford and the Charles University in Prague. The study is on-going and it was launched in September of 2010 at the University of Canterbury, in Christchurch, New Zealand. Firstly, new international students were approached by anonymous online surveys via international departments. Then students, who expressed their willingness to further participate in the research, by recording their email addresses in the anonymous survey were invited to be interviewed. This was followed by a quasi longitudinal study which took the form of a monthly online survey (nine of them). The interviewing of students is in its final stage at the Charles University and the monthly online surveys will be on-going in all involved universities until the completion of data collection in December 2012.

Data for this paper originates from 3 anonymous surveys (n =284, 131, 96), from interviews (n=85) and the monthly surveys no. 1 and 3. The number of students in this study at the moment stands at:

Universities / students	Anonymous survey	Interview
New Zealand	284	50
Oxford	131	23
Charles	96	12

Universities/surveys/students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
NZ	46	31	27	12	8	8	4	5	5
Oxford	17	13	10	5	1	7	1	1	3
Charles	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Weaknesses

The weaknesses of this paper account for unfinished data collection and data analysis. This applies also to the integration of theories on international student mobility to the data analysis. The literature is very briefly mentioned but due to, amongst others, the word count restrictions of this paper, it could not have been included. Lastly, these findings are based on perceptions of international students only; domestic students for example were not included in this study.

Findings

Findings in this study are preliminary, because the data collection is still on-going and because the analysis of data is not final (a more detailed approach will be taken, for example based on gender, country of origin, level of study, university of enrolment of international students).

The next chapters are structured in the following order from the perception of international students:

- Perceptions on international student mobility - benefits and drawbacks
- Compromises, sacrifices and regrets of international students
- Knowledge and skills transfer - benefits and obstacles
- Personal growth of international students

International students were asked what they think about the role of student mobility in society, then what the benefits are and the draw backs of having international students at universities. As for the role of the international students in society, it is perceived as a very diverse, albeit a positive one. The following quote summarises well all of the answers to this question. It pays good service, or if you want it does justice to all the objectives sought by the EU from its study exchange programmes.

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'Student mobility fosters cultural exchange for both the individual travelling, the country they come from, and host family, city, country. That exchange, although challenging and at times unpleasant, is enriching for all parties involved. By being more aware and accepting of cultural differences, people are more functional and thus more competitive in international markets. The exchange of ideas is also not limited by borders (with some exceptions). I personally found my way here through colleagues and advisers who work with other researchers abroad. Being able to move as a student helps me realize the potential and even necessity of doing so as a researcher.'

In regards to the role of internationally mobile students in society, there have not been any answers recorded thus far which have a negative connotation.

In terms of the perceived benefits of international students to domestic and other international students at universities, the students responded with a wide range of advantages. The ultimate benefit accounts for: gaining different world views, perspectives and ways of thinking, broadening horizons, acquiring new values and open mindedness. The Other benefits which featured frequently in students' opinions were either of educational or of cultural character. Hosting international students offers the chance to learn about different cultures, politics, infrastructures, traditions, customs, languages, academic traditions, which ideally leads to a richer exchange of ideas, knowledge, opinions and facts between students and leads to increases in the interaction between different cultures and can be a reciprocal inspiration.

This is followed by the benefit of increased cultural sensitivity and competences of students, increasing empathy for other cultures, ability to deal with other people and to form friendships, to break stereotypes and to learn about human nature. Students also think that a person can increase his or her critical sensibilities and can become more interested in the world, in learning, travel and international employment; in the meantime, students learn to cook foreign meals or celebrate different national or cultural holidays. Lastly, some students mentioned the economic benefit to universities in terms of student fees or in terms of the increased international exposure the reputation of universities receive by hosting international

students. One student is of an opinion that to have international students the benefits are 'none, [...as] stereotyping is very common in lectures and smaller classes. This takes us to the question of the perceived drawbacks of having international students at universities.

According to the responses of international students, their presence at universities can create several problems. Often they are accused of clinginess, especially those who are on a short term exchange, as they seem to be '*not invested in community and campus life.*' Second is the perception that they are taking up space or study positions of domestic students. This was mentioned in regard to students who study their entire degree at a host university. Then the culprit is tuition fees, as the higher international fees reaped by the universities give the impression that the universities themselves naturally give preference to international students over domestic ones.

The third main issue is the language barrier, this has many implications, for example '*slowing the learning pace*' in lectures or issues of societal integration. Lastly, the varying cultural backgrounds of students can cause tension, from minor misunderstandings, to religious or racial problems; although, these last two drawbacks were mentioned only hypothetically twice. Most importantly, the majority of international students do not see any significant drawbacks to having international students at universities.

The answers collected so far present a highly conscious state of mind of students, based on their experiences of being international students. The following observations will follow this lead, demonstrating that students are on unique personal journeys while abroad, which greatly contribute to their personal growth.

When asking international students about the compromises and sacrifices they had to make in order to participate in study abroad, the vast majority of students have had and still have on-going issues or dealings in this regard. Compromises and sacrifices that students make can be divided into three main categories: personal, professional and financial.

The most affected are the personal lives of students, by sacrificing time with their friends and families. These are the top two issues followed by sacrificing love and by having to leave behind the general comfort of their homes and familiar lifestyles. Some students gave up their social lives, political activities and hobbies, as well as culture, the company of *'like-minded people'* and the *'ease of being understood.'* One student felt that he sacrificed his entire life.

In terms of students' professional lives, one third of them lost or gave up their jobs, and two of them missed other PhD offers. Others extended the duration of their degrees by going abroad and one student felt that she sacrificed interesting classes at her home university. As for the financial part of the compromise, students have frequently used up their savings or have borrowed money. Many considered the cost of living abroad and the cost of studying an issue when comparing it with domestic fees in both their host and home countries. Only three students felt that they did not sacrifice anything. This is because their personal experiences hugely outweigh the losses they have encountered, one of those students was for example already on her travels and her study came about later, during her travelling; therefore, as she said, she had already given everything up for travel earlier on.

Students were also asked whether they regret something because of the study abroad. The answers became more personal and specific, which prove that the experience of study abroad is not a single linear positive experience for all students. Only half of the students had no regrets as a clear answer, the rest of them answered 'no' with a 'but,' which was followed by an explanation. Several students actually do have regrets. These regrets, including those with the answer 'no, but,' are mainly of a personal character; although, some regrets relate to students' professional lives, such as a missed job promotion or changed study circumstances due to the departure of a supervisor. As for those personal regrets, they mainly account for missed family functions such as weddings, vacations, births of children or funerals. The same is true for the regrets in regards to friends. The depth of these regrets can be felt for example through the following statements:

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'Yes, I would've been climbing somewhere up the career ladder and living a comfortable life where I would be financially stable, as opposed to relying on my family to ensure that tuition fees and living expenses are paid during my stay abroad. I now feel that I belong in neither country, with no close friends to count on and a deteriorating relationship with my family.'

'I actually regret not "moving on" psychologically while I was in the UK. I would have been able to take better advantage of what Oxford had to offer me and would have approached my studies in a more productive fashion. I should have been able to let go.'

'No. Well, I am really missing my friends. It is hard when you realize that your friendships have not the same quality anymore, as you don't spend daily lives together, but just when you visit each other. when you see each other it is all like before, but it takes time to "really" catch up on what happened in the other's person's life and by then you often have to leave already again.'

'I missed the opportunity to enjoy life in my home country and learn more about my culture, which are important especially given that I will have to eventually return home. I also missed out on the chance to live close to my family. However, such are not regrets. I do regret coming to study abroad.'

These and others similar to these 'regret confessions' demonstrate students' deep emotional engagement in a life experience abroad, which is often their most significant to date. It can be argued that all of this greatly contributes to their becoming an adult, perhaps more for the younger students or for those for whom this study abroad is their first time away from home. These experiences definitely contribute to the students' personal growth. The same is true for the following set of questions on knowledge transfer.

The first question in this case was: what have you learned from people in general while in New Zealand (in the UK or in the Czech Republic), by people I mean anybody - could be your classmate, professor, neighbour etc.? Students mostly learned about, from and through meetings with people in host countries. They have learned to accept people from

different backgrounds and to appreciate people for what they are. They have become more adaptable, creative, meticulous, respectful and open minded, and to be unafraid of speaking up. Students got to know that they need to place themselves in other people's shoes, that *'likes attracts likes'* and *'learned that the world is not what it may seem, and there are multiple realities occurring at once.'*

In New Zealand, they have learned about this country's history and that Kiwis have very different views on a lot of things, and that they are distinctly different from Canadians, but have many things in common with Alaskans. According to international students New Zealanders treat everything more openly, equally and honestly, they know how to relax and enjoy life and they are *'straightforward, honest, and direct.'* American students think that Kiwis appreciate and protect their wildlife much more than Americans do and live more sustainably; on the other hand, German and Canadian students have been surprised by the exact opposite of that and by the fact that in New Zealand *'old fashioned'* belief systems can still be perpetuated in well-connected, *'western civilization - especially when we are in such an immense age of connectedness and globalization.'* Students also acquired knowledge in class, academic skills, the way of doing research; they have improved their English language skills and learned some Maori language too. One student mentioned that she has *'learned the value of think locally act globally.'*

In the UK's case, students learned how to queue and the appropriate customary behaviours and how English humour works. Students in all countries have learned about themselves too, for example, the American students realised that they did not fit the preconceived and expected stereotypes which people in New Zealand and in the UK had about them. One Swiss student grasped that it is not necessary to be *'extremely punctual'* at all times. One sentence amongst others, by a Canadian female student in New Zealand says it all as she learned that: *'Everyone just wants to be loved and accepted.'*

Next, students were asked: where do you see the benefits of knowledge and skills circulation/transfer?²⁶ Like previously the answers can be divided into two categories, personal and professional, but in this case the boundaries of these categories often disappear, because the answers listed have universal implication.

In terms of personal benefits, students thought of: tolerance, reduced discrimination, of being enriched by ethnic and religious backgrounds of domestic and international students for both groups of students. Many benefits relate to culture, for example gaining a cultural insight, respect and understanding of other cultures and cultural exchange, which is connected with broadened ways of thinking, sharing ideas, understanding different points of view, acquiring new ideas, and new perspectives and enhanced intellectual potential. Students valued the life experience outside of the university, and thought that knowledge sharing increases their friendship circles, eases their transition into the host society and it contributes to their personal growth, identity building, finding direction in life, and that it helps them to become better individuals.

As for the professional benefits of knowledge and skills transfer, they are believed to be mutual and based on the different academic backgrounds of students. Knowledge transferred or circulated becomes deeper and broader in scope, it helps to speed up learning and better understanding, and it saves time in research and results in original and creative solutions. It also contributes to international exposure leading thus to: more international interactions, a positive international image of universities, as well as to the *'ease of crossing borders.'* Knowledge and skills transfers are believed to *'improve the ability to work with people from a variety of backgrounds,'* which is important for future business, academic and political relations, *'especially between developing countries and developed countries.'*

²⁶ Knowledge – (definition offered in the question): facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject.

Skill – (definition offered in the question): the ability to do something well; skill expertise is practiced ability, facility in action or in doing or to do something.

Some students put it very accurately:

'These benefits increase in proportion to globalisation and include an increased flexibility in using multidimensional approach to solve a range of problems.'

'Part of cultural exchange, part of building oneself's identify, part of learning a trade and finding a direction in life.'

'To increase awareness and respects of other cultures and ways of thinking To train and produce a more globally skilled labour force To connect individuals and facilitate the creation of a collective identity which makes people from different spheres and walks of life gather their knowledge and skills for the greater good of their community.'

'Knowledge is limitless. The more you know about anything and everything, the better your life will be. Learning through your own experiences and others allows your mind to grow and expand.'

'That transfer is at the heart of my desire to study and live in another country. The education at UC is secondary to the experiences gained in a new country, and the time spent interacting with the 'locals'.'

Students were also asked whether they can think of any obstacles to knowledge and skills transfer/circulation and how can they be improved. The language barrier scored the highest position, followed by the clinginess of students to their groups of friends. Another highly mentioned obstacle points to the departments, colleges and universities themselves, because students miss seminars where they could be debating and showcasing their research. They often do not even know what kind of research is being carried out at their own departments. This, identified by students, is partly the consequence of different teaching and learning traditions embedded in the institutions and countries, for example *'Oxford is rooted in a tradition of solitary learning'* or *'I see the major obstacle in skills circulation is the*

scientific and research tradition formed in the country, where the person you are sharing the skills with, came from.'

A wish for smaller classes was expressed several times, this would enhance team building, which could help to eliminate another set of frequently observed obstacles, such as cultural difference, some kind of degree hierarchy among students, arrogance, pride or competitiveness, disinterested students and academics, unfocused lectures or lack of study material in order *'to get an in-depth knowledge.'* Finally, several students could not think of any obstacles to knowledge and skills transfer.

Still in terms of obstacles to knowledge and skills transfer, students were asked a few months later into their studies whether they have experienced any obstacles in knowledge and skills transfer and what were they? Similar to the responses from the earlier asked question the language barrier was the greatest obstacle, but just as many students had as had not experienced issues with knowledge and skills transfer. The rest of the answers mirror the previous answers, namely the cultural differences, study material, communication failures, and supervisors, because of their *'conservative academic philosophy.'* A pointed observation was made by one of the students who wrote that *'the most important is not the degree of the knowledge transfer but the variety of voices you hear.'*

The next set of four questions sought to find out what skills and knowledge the students acquired and what had they shared or passed on while studying abroad. Students were very explicit and listed a plethora of theoretical and practical skills and knowledge that they had acquired and passed on, such as: knowledge of the history, customs, culture, and politics of their home and host countries; a great amount of sports; languages, musical and culinary abilities; knowledge and skills gained on study courses or field work based knowledge; several professions, because many students subsidise their income by working full or part time.

Lastly, a question was asked of the students as to whether they thought they had personally grown while away and the responses showed that all but one student thought they

had done, one student stated maybe. Elaborating on their answers, the students said that they were very much shaped by the locations, environments and mainly by the people they met while being on studies abroad. They have enhanced their social skills, achieved more independence, they had become more open minded and broadened in their thinking, also they had become more adaptable, adventurous and they felt an easier connection with people of any kind.

Conclusion

The silver lining of student experiences in this case is personal growth. This is valued as it fits with the objectives of the EU's student exchange programmes; as well as for international students' individual experiences at their host universities (in their host countries). Students' experiences are exciting and promising, for them and for the EU; although uncertainty and feelings of frustration abound. They have limited time abroad, some shorter some longer, to make their international study a success. Time will tell whether it has worked for them in the long run. The following two statements sum up the main idea of this paper. The experiences of international students abroad mature them and a huge part of this is due to their interaction with people along this journey; at the same time, international students have similarly positive affect on the lives of their peers.

'I have shared my experiences traveling abroad, acted as an ambassador of sorts for the USA, Canada, and the state of Alaska. I continue to teach geology to students at the university, and I emphasize comparisons with rocks in other continents and countries. A global perspective is essential to fully appreciate how incredible NZ geology is.'

Skills shared and passed on were: *'Debating in classes and intercultural awareness. Some of my classmates were pretty racist, so I hope I have made them start thinking more critical about their statements and biases.'*

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