Self-Reported Effects Of And Satisfaction With International Student Mobility: A Large-Scale Survey Among Polish Former Erasmus Students

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Abstract

On the basis of a large-scale online survey, we examined the self-reported effects of and satisfaction with international student mobility among Polish tertiary education students who took part in such mobility 5-6 years before the survey. They emphasised the following benefits: improving their foreign language skills, making international friends, enhancing their intercultural understanding, becoming more mobile, independent, self-confident, and feeling more European (an identity effect). More than 2/3 of our respondents indicated the highest possible level of general satisfaction with their international student mobility and more than 90% of the study subjects did not hesitate to recommend such an experience to their friends. Therefore, promoting the participation of university students in study periods abroad seems both an attractive and a valuable educational technology, at least from the Polish perspective.

Keywords: international student mobility, Erasmus, Poland, mobility effects, student satisfaction

1. Introduction

We can observe an acceleration of the processes of internationalisation of higher education. Education and training providers are facing demands of the industry and labour markets internationally (Starcic, 2012). Although it is possible to achieve some international experience through online learning communities (Hudson, Owen, & Veen, 2006; Hudson, Hudson, & Steel, 2006; Spiro, 2011; Taras et al., 2013), participating in international student mobility seems a much more powerful and comprehensive educational technology. As the number of students

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enrolled in study abroad programs continues to grow, especially thanks to the Erasmus programme in Europe, it is worth considering the effectiveness of this kind of education. In this paper, we provide an overview of self-perceived effects and satisfaction reported by former outgoing Erasmus students from Poland. In 2012, we conducted a large-scale survey (2450 complete responses received) among all Polish Erasmus students who took part in the mobility for studies in 2006 and 2007. Dissemination of information on positive effects and high levels of satisfaction may help overcome some of the obstacles to international student mobility, which, in the Polish context, were analysed by Bryła and Ciabia (2014).

2. Literature review

One of the major educational goals of the internationalisation of higher education is to prepare students to function in an international and inter-cultural context (Volet & Ang, 2012). Participants of a study on experiences and perceptions of internationalisation in UK higher education institutions gave anecdotal evidence of feeling personally rewarded in terms of building new friendships and developing their intercultural competencies (Trahar & Hyland, 2011). Both local and international students are experiencing dissatisfaction with the lack of inter-cultural student interaction occurring in classrooms (Cooper, 2009). Increasing international and domestic student interaction leads to higher satisfaction ratings and better learning outcomes (Cruickshank, Chen, & Warren, 2012). Preparation is an important factor in getting satisfaction out of the study abroad programme (Wang, Taplin, & Brown, 2011). Coping is a moderator between expectations prior to a study abroad programme and post level satisfaction (Hill & Iyer, 2010). Internship or work integrated learning experience enhances the satisfaction of students with their international education experience (Matthews & Lawley, 2011). Effects of international student mobility may be considered as a form of technology transfer (Heller, 1989). Study abroad is associated with significant gains in intellectual development. It is those students who lack meaningful international exposure who seem to benefit most from studying abroad (McKeown, 2009). A study period abroad improves fluency and lexical complexity in the second language (Serrano, Llanes, & Tragant, 2011).

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Foreign students evaluated their studies in Poland very positively in general with lower assessments of such aspects as the possibility to find a job during the studies, possibility to stay in Poland after graduating from the university, and the administrative services related to their studies in Poland. Lower satisfaction levels were reported among those foreign students who followed their programmes of studies in English that among those who studied in Polish. Satisfaction levels also differed according to the host university and were probably related to the region of origin of foreign students in Poland. Students of Polish origin and students coming from the Community of Independent States (consisting of most former Soviet Union republics) and American students were most interested in prolonging their stay in Poland, whereas Scandinavian, Asian and African students were least interested. The obtained results were much more favourable than the findings of a similar study conducted in 1997/98 at the University of Warsaw. Then half of foreign students reported they had experienced some kind of aggression in Poland, especially verbal aggression (Hut & Jaroszewska, 2011, p. 15-16). Polish students tend to consider an enrolment abroad as a way to develop personally. 93% of students who have been enrolled abroad believe their expectations are fulfilled at (very) high level. 91% of Polish students agree that their language improved due to foreign enrolment. 84% of students from Poland are satisfied with the quality of education abroad. ¾ of them consider social integration as important for an enriching foreign enrolment period (Orr, Gwosć, & Netz, 2011, p. 198). The European Commission (2011, p. 37-41) ordered a survey among representative samples of young people (aged between 15 and 35) living in the 27 EU Member States, as well as in Croatia, Iceland, Norway and Turkey. In total, 30,312 interviews were conducted by Gallup’s network of fieldwork organizations. Among benefits of international mobility, Polish respondents emphasized the importance of improved foreign language skills more often than most other surveyed nationalities. On the other hand, improved awareness of another culture was reported as the most or second most important benefit of mobility less often in Poland than in other European countries. 23% of Polish respondents mentioned greater adaption ability as the most important benefit of their international mobility. Poland scores better in rankings showing foreign students’ satisfaction with stay by host country than satisfaction with studies. For instance, in the recent ESN survey, in which 8,444 students shared their opinions and experiences about studying or working abroad (Alfranseder, Fellinger, & Taivere, 2011, p. 11, 17-18), Poland got 4.53 mean evaluation of the satisfaction with stay, whereas the average was 4.49, and the result for the satisfaction with studies was 3.99, which was below average (4.06). In terms of satisfaction with stay, Poland performed better than Denmark, Germany, Italy, Finland, USA, Turkey, Czech Republic, Netherlands, Ireland, France, Latvia, UK, Belgium, Greece, Norway, and Switzerland. In this ranking, there were few countries that performed better than Poland: Estonia, Portugal, Austria, Sweden, Hungary, Spain, Lithuania, and Canada. Regarding the satisfaction with studies among foreign students, Poland was better than: Belgium, Turkey, Italy, Spain, Latvia. France, Hungary, and Greece, but it was evaluated worse than: USA, Denmark, Switzerland, Ireland, Sweden, Canada, Austria, the Netherlands, Germany, Estonia, Norway, Finland, UK, and Portugal.
3. Sample characteristics and main findings

We invited to take the survey all Polish students who had filled in their evaluation forms on the website of the Foundation for the Development of Education System regarding their Erasmus mobility for studies in 2007 (5942 study subjects) and 2008 (6635 study subjects). We added to the sample all graduates from the Faculty of International and Political Studies of the University of Lodz (2128 study subjects) in order to create a control group of internationally immobile students and some representatives of various age cohorts. Thus altogether we addressed our questionnaire to 14705 Polish students through the Internet professional survey service called moje-ankiety.pl in November and December 2012. We received 2450 completed questionnaires. Therefore, the response rate amounted to 16.7%, which may be considered a very good result for this kind of research methodology, taking into account the length of the questionnaire and the associated time and effort required to fill it in. 2369 of our study subjects studied abroad for at least a semester or trimester, whereas 81 did not take part in such mobility. Out of the 2369 study participants who had had a study period abroad, 82.6% studied abroad once, 14.5% twice, 2.1% three times, and 0.7% more than 3 times. 27.7% of our respondents in the former international student mobility sample were males, and 72.3% were females. In the control group, there were 79.0% of females and 21.0% males. This result may be due to several factors, including the higher participation of women in university education and their higher propensity to take part in surveys. We have obtained answers from former Erasmus students representing 115 Polish higher education institutions. Therefore, our sample is very diverse and resembles very well the general population of all Polish outgoing Erasmus students. Unsurprisingly, the ranking is led by the biggest state-owned universities. The top 5 include: University of Warsaw, Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznan, University of Lodz, University of Wroclaw, and the Jagiellonian University of Cracow. The third rank of the University of Lodz stems partly from its remarkable performance within the Erasmus program and partly from the extension of our sample to other age cohorts from the Faculty of International and Political Studies. It is also worth noting the high positions occupied by technical universities, including the Technical University of Lodz, which was the 6th regarding the number of respondents. We were unable to identify the home university of almost 6% of our respondents due to incomplete data, ambivalent abbreviations, mistakes, and deliberate refusal to provide the information. 22.3% of the internationally mobile Polish students in our sample took part in their mobility at the Bachelor level of studies, 78.2% at the Master level, 4.6% at the doctoral studies level, and 4.1% said it was another level of studies (including 5-year studies leading to a Master, engineer studies, medical studies, non-degree studies, postgraduate studies, MBA, MFA, after completing studies in Poland, study sessions/certificates, a language course, a college, secondary school, a thematic Socrates course, a summer school, a research scholarship). The study participants carried out their international student mobility usually in 2007 or 2008, which stems from our sampling method. The year of mobility ranges from 1997 to 2012 due to the inclusion of various age cohorts form the University of Lodz, with the vast majority of students taking part in Erasmus in 2007 and 2008. The main destination countries for the student (first-time) mobility of our study subjects were: Germany, Spain, France, Denmark, UK, Portugal, Finland, Belgium and Italy (table 1). In total 37 host countries are represented in our sample, as it concerns not only Erasmus mobility, but all kinds of student mobility. Nevertheless, Erasmus accounts for a vast majority of destination countries mentioned by our respondents.
Our respondents reported having taken part in international student mobility, which lasted (for the first time) usually a semester (62.9% of answers) (**Table 2**). Less than 1/3 of the study subjects studied abroad for a year, and only 2.2% spent there more than one year. As far as the second and third-time mobility is concerned, its duration tends to be longer, but these are relatively rare cases.
Table 2. The duration of the international student mobility

| Mobility spell | Fraction |
|----------------|----------|
|                | For the first time |          |
|                | Less than a semester | 0.033 |
|                | A semester          | 0.629 |
|                | A year              | 0.310 |
|                | More than a year    | 0.022 |
|                | For the second time |          |
|                | Less than a semester | 0.030 |
|                | A semester          | 0.055 |
|                | A year              | 0.044 |
|                | More than a year    | 0.041 |
|                | For the third time  |          |
|                | Less than a semester | 0.007 |
|                | A semester          | 0.006 |
|                | A year              | 0.006 |
|                | More than a year    | 0.012 |

Source: own research

Table 3. The self-reported effects of international student mobility (fractions)

| Effect                                               | R    | 7     | 6     | 5     | 4     | 3     | 2     | 1     |
|------------------------------------------------------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Better host country language skills                  | 1    | 0.524 | 0.137 | 0.122 | 0.061 | 0.033 | 0.049 | 0.069 |
| Making international friends                        | 2    | 0.516 | 0.221 | 0.152 | 0.048 | 0.017 | 0.017 | 0.017 |
| Better other foreign language skills                 | 3    | 0.485 | 0.214 | 0.131 | 0.069 | 0.022 | 0.020 | 0.049 |
| Better intercultural understanding                   | 4    | 0.441 | 0.269 | 0.176 | 0.058 | 0.013 | 0.014 | 0.013 |
| Becoming more mobile                                 | 5    | 0.423 | 0.263 | 0.147 | 0.098 | 0.020 | 0.013 | 0.029 |
| Becoming more independent                            | 6    | 0.422 | 0.249 | 0.157 | 0.095 | 0.021 | 0.016 | 0.032 |
| Becoming more self-confident                         | 7    | 0.372 | 0.280 | 0.185 | 0.092 | 0.025 | 0.013 | 0.024 |
| Feeling more European                                | 8    | 0.336 | 0.195 | 0.153 | 0.146 | 0.035 | 0.031 | 0.092 |
| Making friends with local people                     | 9    | 0.287 | 0.203 | 0.203 | 0.137 | 0.050 | 0.050 | 0.057 |
| Increase of one’s aspirations towards career         | 10   | 0.284 | 0.229 | 0.171 | 0.185 | 0.041 | 0.027 | 0.053 |
| More opportunities to get a better job               | 11   | 0.279 | 0.220 | 0.192 | 0.183 | 0.033 | 0.036 | 0.043 |
| Feeling more international                           | 12   | 0.276 | 0.186 | 0.154 | 0.198 | 0.034 | 0.030 | 0.107 |
| Becoming more entrepreneurial                         | 13   | 0.274 | 0.223 | 0.209 | 0.176 | 0.041 | 0.021 | 0.043 |
| Improvement of one’s academic knowledge              | 14   | 0.257 | 0.256 | 0.243 | 0.140 | 0.048 | 0.022 | 0.025 |
| More opportunities to get a job abroad                | 15   | 0.255 | 0.209 | 0.183 | 0.209 | 0.041 | 0.033 | 0.056 |
| Bibliography for one’s thesis                        | 16   | 0.211 | 0.099 | 0.106 | 0.111 | 0.062 | 0.066 | 0.334 |
| Better ability to work in a team                     | 17   | 0.199 | 0.191 | 0.222 | 0.221 | 0.051 | 0.038 | 0.065 |
| More motivations towards learning                    | 18   | 0.170 | 0.176 | 0.198 | 0.219 | 0.071 | 0.055 | 0.089 |
| Improvement of one’s learning skills                 | 19   | 0.148 | 0.157 | 0.209 | 0.257 | 0.082 | 0.049 | 0.082 |
| Better knowledge of the labour market                | 20   | 0.125 | 0.135 | 0.180 | 0.257 | 0.089 | 0.075 | 0.124 |
| Other effects                                        | 21   | 0.027 | 0.003 | 0.002 | 0.041 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.060 |

Notes: R – rank; 7 – totally agree; 1 – totally disagree
Source: own research

According to our respondents, the study abroad period affected to the largest extent the following elements: host country language skills and making international friends (more than a half of our respondents totally agreed with these effects) (table 3). The third rank was taken by the improvement of other foreign language skills, followed by an increase of one’s intercultural understanding. Then we noticed several effects related to the personal development of the study subjects. They reported becoming more mobile, independent and self-confident thanks to the international student mobility. More than a third mentioned they felt more European. Making friends with local people was much less common than making international friends, which confirmed our expectations and previous research results. The study subjects also believed that their student mobility contributed to an increase of their expectations towards a professional career and almost the same number of them were confident their opportunities to get a better job increased. More than a half of the respondents totally agreed with the following effects: feeling more international, becoming more entrepreneurial, improvement of their academic knowledge, and having more
opportunities to get a job abroad, which would constitute a link between the student mobility and subsequent professional mobility. Less important effects included: having collected the bibliography for one’s thesis, improving one’s ability to work in a team, being more motivated towards learning, improving one’s learning skills, and increasing one’s knowledge about the labour market. Other effects, which were not listed in our catalogue of answer options, were considered totally relevant by only 2.7% of our respondents. Therefore, the catalogue seems quite exhaustive. We can observe certain similarities between mobility motivations and self-reported effects. Improvement of one’s linguistic and intercultural competencies as well as making international friends and becoming more independent were mentioned in both contexts. Improvement of one’s career prospects was estimated as a higher-ranking motivation than effect, so the study period abroad might not live up to the expectations of some participants in this regard, but still it allowed to increase one’s aspirations and key competencies as well as the subsequent international mobility. The remaining international student mobility effects, which were mentioned spontaneously by our respondents, included: getting to know a different lifestyle and way of thinking; reducing one’s inferiority complex in relation to other cultures; appreciating more one’s own culture and way of living in Poland; having done a lot of sightseeing; opportunity to get an interesting work placement; obtaining a language certificate, which was appreciated by the employer; willingness to know other labour markets and cultures; an interesting job proposal; it is harder to accept the lack of ability to travel; appreciating better the level of studies at the home university; noticing different teaching methods; getting to know the local food and drinks; becoming more self-confident to start an academic career abroad; some employers have a negative approach to Erasmus in one’s CV, because they associate it only with parties, especially in Spain; becoming happier; personal culture, optimism, positive attitude, courage in social contacts; loads of memories; having a rest from the constraints and requirements associated with studying in Poland; living and working abroad; being more experienced in teaching Polish as a foreign language; having a partner encountered during the Erasmus mobility; learning that ‘impossible is nothing’; learning to enjoy oneself in various ways in a diverse company; learning to appreciate Poland in spite of various problems; starting a permanent academic cooperation; acquiring knowledge and competencies in another context – global; being more open to the world and new opportunities and inspirations; realising how miserable is the life of those who do not take part in any mobility; finding an idea of one’s thesis; getting to know other education systems and ways of conducting research; getting rid of the complex of being a student from Poland as Polish universities provide a very solid theoretical basis for further achievements; getting to know the real life abroad not as a tourist; getting to know new opportunities; getting to know the regional specificity; getting to know one’s parents-in-law and the family life in Turkey; working abroad; making friends with other Poles, getting to know the Polish emigration culture, and Polish Catholic missions abroad; getting practical knowledge under conditions which are not available at the home university; lower motivation to learn after the return due to a dramatic decrease in the level and interest of studying compared to the host university; believing it is possible to achieve a success if one works hard; being motivated to take part in a subsequent mobility in the framework of Leonardo; the mobility helped to be accepted for doctoral studies later on; realising that mass university education is not a good solution; feeling more Polish; noticing what is missing in Poland and what can be offered to other cultures, learning the respect for other cultures; appreciating other values and lifestyles; realising that Europeans are quite similar; returning to the host country for another purpose, including postgraduate and doctoral studies; becoming sure one wants to stay in Poland after the return; becoming proud of being Polish and willing to present one’s strengths; higher self-assessment, higher propensity to face challenges, including related to changing one’s place of living; becoming more aware of one’s responsibility for Europe; strengthening one’s faith; setting up an international family; willingness to travel and new possibilities to do it; learning how to learn foreign languages effectively; becoming more ambitious, breaking through the archaic patterns of Polish universities. We asked our respondents to identify the most positive element of their international student mobility. 2017 study participants answered this question. Most often they mentioned learning languages, the ability to get to know another culture, international friendships, broadening one’s horizons, and improving one’s chances for a professional career. As far as the least positive aspects of mobility are concerned, we received 1920 answers. Most often the respondents mentioned financial difficulties, problems with integrating the study period abroad with their study programme, and separation from one’s family. Numerous respondents answered that the main problem was that the study period abroad was too short, which confirms their high level of satisfaction with the international student mobility.
Our study subjects feel their mobility period was either too short or had the right duration (table 4). Very small fractions indicated that it was too long. Therefore, we may infer they were entirely satisfied about their international student mobility. A similar pattern of answers was observed for subsequent student mobility periods.

Table 4. The evaluation of duration of international student mobility (fractions)

| Mobility     | 7  | 6  | 5  | 4  | 3  | 2  | 1  |
|--------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 1st time     | 0.000 | 0.003 | 0.015 | 0.413 | 0.134 | 0.127 | 0.301 |
| 2nd time     | 0.001 | 0.003 | 0.006 | 0.082 | 0.021 | 0.014 | 0.044 |
| 3rd time     | 0.000 | 0.001 | 0.001 | 0.019 | 0.002 | 0.002 | 0.006 |

Notes: 7 – much too long; 4 – perfect duration; 1 – much too short;
Source: own research

Our inferences were confirmed by a straightforward assessment of one’s satisfaction with the international student mobility (table 5). More than 2/3 of our respondents indicated the highest possible level of general satisfaction. The study subjects were a little less enthusiastic in their evaluations of the mobility effects, including the impact on current mobility, its utility in finding a job and its utility in acquiring basic job or learning skills. Nevertheless, positive assessments prevail largely over negative feelings.

Table 5. The level of satisfaction with international student mobility (fractions)

| Area                                      | 7    | 6    | 5    | 4    | 3    | 2    | 1    |
|-------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| General satisfaction with one’s mobility  | 0.669 | 0.209 | 0.079 | 0.027 | 0.003 | 0.001 | 0.002 |
| Impact on current mobility                | 0.394 | 0.241 | 0.157 | 0.150 | 0.019 | 0.014 | 0.009 |
| Utility in finding a job                  | 0.270 | 0.211 | 0.170 | 0.208 | 0.035 | 0.049 | 0.043 |
| Utility in acquiring basic job/learning skills | 0.230 | 0.244 | 0.206 | 0.198 | 0.043 | 0.040 | 0.026 |

Notes: 7 – very satisfactory/useful; 1 – completely unsatisfactory/useless;
Source: own research

The high satisfaction level was also reflected in answers to the subsequent question whether one would recommend participation in international student mobility to one’s friends. More than 90% of the study subjects had no doubts they would recommend such an experience to their friends.

4. Conclusion

The process of internationalisation of university education is becoming more and intensive and widespread all over the world and international student mobility constitutes a key element of this process. There is an impressive growth in the number of students participating in international mobility, in particular due to the development of the Erasmus programme in Europe. Although Poland joined the programme with some delay due to political circumstances, it shows considerable dynamics. On the basis of a large-scale online survey, we examined the self-reported effects of and satisfaction with international student mobility among Polish tertiary education students who took part in such mobility 5-6 years before the survey. They emphasised the following benefits: improving their foreign language skills, making international friends, enhancing their intercultural understanding, becoming more mobile, independent, self-confident, and feeling more European (an identity effect). More than 2/3 of our respondents indicated the highest possible level of general satisfaction with their international student mobility and more than 90% of the study subjects would not hesitate to recommend such an experience to their friends. Therefore, promoting the participation of university students in study periods abroad seems both an attractive and valuable educational technology, at least from the Polish perspective.
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