Individual, Socio-economic and Political Levels of Student Mobility: A Case Study of the Erasmus Programme

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Abstract

As a classic case of international student mobility, the Erasmus programme has made great achievements so far, and it will be used as an object of case study in this article. This article will explore the related theory of individualization, and explain Individual accounts of student mobility are stories of ‘individualisation’ and ‘do-it yourself’ biographies from 3 aspects, such as academic benefits, career benefits and self-cognition and social adaptability. It also proposes and explains the other two different dimensions of student mobility, which is socio-economic level and political level, in order to prove the experiences of international student mobility have the potential to be more than 'stories' of individual gains. It illustrates socio-economic level from 3 aspects: labour market, economic mobility and the social conflict and integration, and explains political level in 2 ways European citizen and European consciousness and neo-liberalism and socio-democratic traditions.

Keywords

Student mobility, the Erasmus programme, internationalization of higher education

1. Introduction

1.1 History and current situation

Student mobility may always be a significant characteristic and a portion of the mission of higher education (Gunther, 2021). Furthermore, student mobility is a long-standing phenomenon, not a new one. Rationales underlying international mobility of students and scholars have been historically situated, located within a broader understanding of the global dynamics relevant to the particular and shifting historical circumstances. Indeed, the phenomenon of mobility does not only express broader historical shifts it also sometimes drives them. Movement shapes the form of educational system, and has the potentiality to transform community identities.

It is confirmed by historical evidence that students travelled long distances to study at ancient Indian universities, China, and the Middle East. In the 17th and 18th centuries, for instance, students flocked to Indian universities not only to study art, architecture, and religion but also the sciences and mathematics. Alexandria and Baghdad housed major centres of learning, hosting a large number of scholars and students from Greece and Rome. Conversely, medieval universities in Europe, such as Bologna, attracted Asian and the Middle Eastern students.

After the World War II, the number of international students has been increasing, over the last 30 years especially. It
grows from 600,000 in 1975 to 4,100,000 in 2010. According to UNESCO statistics, around 1,000,000 students studied abroad in the late 1980s. Meanwhile, the number of students participating in the international exchange programmes, such as the Erasmus programme, has been increasing. The Erasmus Programme was launched in 1987, and its full name is European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students. It aims to increase the mobility of European students and contributes to the development of students socially and academically (Mehmet, 2021). In 1987, a great many students participating in the Erasmus programme was 3,244, it increased to 190,495 in 2010. In the next EU long-term budget for 2021-2027, the European Commission proposes to increase Erasmus' funding to 30 billion euros. In this way, it is possible to support up to 12 million people between 2021 and 2027 (Caviezel, 2020).

1.2 Relative conceptions

Generally, globalization is used to discuss higher education on the transnational basement. The globalising higher education could be regarded as a positive feedback and an aspect of the broader proceeding of globalism. Describing the relationship between globalization, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) illustrates that the need of OECD’s new educational provision can be increased by the free circulation of capital, goods and services, and the open labour market.

The world may be becoming increasingly international. The global part of the world, for example, the closer transnational communication and the promotion of the status of the international, promote the proceeding of globalising higher education and increase the pressure on universities to maintain. Meanwhile, the interests and needs of nations are emphasized more in the term internationalization. Internationalization is based on the concept of ‘nation’, emphasizing the relationship between countries.

Internationalization of higher education argues that the economic competition among countries can ensure a country’s economic competitiveness and development. Institutional discourse emphasizes it is necessary for students to prepare for future global labour market, and suggests that international education is one of the means they can prepare themselves.

The international student mobility is often regarded as a ‘flow’ in the transnational education environment. Altbach illustrates that a number of scholars and scientists travel abroad temporarily for research or teaching in the environment of global higher education. Globalization supports this flow and ensures it continue development. Academic system becomes similar and academic degrees become increasingly wide, as growth of students’ interest of studying aboard, the international student market will expand (Altbach, 2004).

2. Individual level

Student mobility is a form of elective biography (do-it-yourself biography), and is conducive to the appearance of a more liberal individual. Results shows that Erasmus mobility experience can help students to build personal beliefs self-monitor and take control on life-path positively (Papatsiba, 2005). It agreed by exchange students that the mobility experience may the development of individual autonomy.

We primarily classified them in to three main categories: academic benefits, career benefits and self-cognition and social adaptability.

2.1 Academic benefits

In the students’ accounts, the academic experience is the most developed part. The Erasmus programme provides a different academic environment to students, including organising principles, the content of courses, the pedagogic style, and so on. The students try to adapt the new academic system and form their own experience gradually. An investigation from Papatsiba (2005) showed that students particularly emphasized having been faced with the difference organisation of the higher education system and pedagogic style in the Erasmus programme. This experience of difference was thought highly as a self-evident good at the end according to the opinion of other Erasmus students.

Papatsiba (2005) conducted a survey to Erasmus students and the results remains mixed about the evaluation of course quality. Some affirmed to have widened or to have deepened their disciplinary knowledge, even their reflection about their subject. On the other hand, others appreciated less the academic outcomes. The results showed that, even if the academic content did not always satisfy students, their remarks preserved a positive tone as a whole.

Another significant aspect is that students develop their foreign language capacities, and the researches demonstrate that oral interaction is the most developed component (Gomez & Vicente, 2011). This means that, in the real environment, spoken language is the most used and the students have acquired more flexibility and fluency in the communicative exchange. In this process, the acquisition of speaking and listening skills are promoted.
Using different languages to communicate in a foreign country promotes the construction of mental thinking techniques based on plurilingualism (Gomez & Vicente, 2011). Students learn to think and to communicate in diverse linguistic systems and to acquire multicultural values.

2.2 Career benefits

One of the important reasons for the students to participate in the Erasmus program is the professional motivation. The promotion of language skills and communication skills enable students to obtain additional qualifications in labour market in other counties’ context. The analysis showed Erasmus students have the advantage of studying and working in a foreign country, through using residence time to be familiar with the host country and its labour. In students’ point of view, the economic context of Europe provides a broader career space, while requires new personal stances and abilities. Experience seems to effectively expand the scope of personal intelligent.

Students give professional mobility as a significant reason for participation in the Erasmus programme, at the end of their stay they deal with this issue in different way. This experience may bring about intellectual capacities which generally correspond to modes of thought, being enriched by new and different viewpoints. Academic mobility can aid in the creation of direct and indirect cross-sector partnerships. Students who go to other countries can learn deeply and more about how other cultures/societies operate (Nogueiro et al., 2022). Given the current social and economic context requiring mobility, open-mindedness and flexibility, students consider it as an essential capital. They also place it within the European economic context that changes the professional ‘map’ of possibilities and constraints by providing a larger space, and by requesting new qualifications. Expanding people’s intellectual horizon acquires acquiring new modes of thought which is related to future professional responsibilities. Moreover, students reported achievements on the psychological level which increases social adaptability, seen as both flexibility and resilience which are valuable for career development.

The qualification advantages to employability and future work are the important factors which influence on students’ opinions about the value of exchange studies. Study abroad is regarded as qualification promotion, an indications that the students can obtain skills that future employer’s desire in this process.

2.3 Self-cognition and social adaptability

As to personal benefits, it is possible for Erasmus students to resolve the issue of objectivity by focusing on the self-perception. Thus, the subjective aspect prevails and what is important is to see what the person believes s/he is, having become or can become. The difference in how students perceive and portray themselves constituted one of the most remarkable individual evolutions which occurred after the Erasmus stay. The person, the individual abilities, aspirations, projects were placed in the centre of the experience and became an object for introspection, analysis and knowledge. The experience of stay abroad, under the conditions created by Erasmus programme, was at the origin of personal development of self-cognition and personal identity.

The development of self-awareness can be accompanied by the development of a pro-social conscience in a double movement of both self-affirmation and opening to others: The Erasmus students reported to having become more sensitive, pro-social and tolerant. They can make contact with others with ease and be attentive to them, or even more important, accept their difference.

A less radical and more frequent reported change was the acquisition of adaptability. The person believes that the range of adaptive answers, attitudes and even capacities has widened. The ways of considering oneself are enriched and evolved by the perception of an increased flexibility and resilience. The social and cultural environments enable students to see what they were able to solve. The cultural difference is treated like new situations that develop students’ social adaptability. Cultural benefits, in return, are converted into personal asset.

3. Socio-economic level

In the European Union policy vision, international student mobility could be usefully analysed with the help of a twofold categorization: first, as an instrument for human resource training apposite to the requirements of an economic union and its common market, and second as an aid in shaping the development of the European citizen by not only enacting the basic European rights of free circulation but also by forging European consciousness. These issues will be discussed in this part from socio-economic level and next part from political level.

In this part, socio-economic level of student mobility will be stressed into 3 aspects: labour market, economic mobility and the social conflict and integration.
3.1 Labour market

The three of the five objectives of the Erasmus programme explain international student mobility as ‘human resource’ training (Papatsiba, 2009). These goals recognise the need for society to draw lessons from the pool of manpower with first-hand experience of socio-economic field of other member countries. To some extent, the objectives of the Erasmus programme have been achieved.

The results suggest that educational mobility produced by Erasmus programmes may play an important role to influence students’ decision about labour market mobility. Member States can provide student exchange opportunities and scholarship, attract talented graduates to study in their universities, and finally part of them will continue to work there. As a whole, Erasmus programme is effective and can promote the growth of European labour market.

More generally, the results show that Erasmus programmes not just influence students’ decision about studying abroad but also affect the labour market and students’ careers. It can be pointed out that even short term student exchange programmes have a profound impact on further labour market mobility.

Furthermore, the integration of the labour market also means the integration of intellectual resources. The intellectual resources in member states’ universities are the important factors of the competitiveness of world market. The intellectual potential of the individual universities throughout the Universities’ intellectual resources can be more significantly through social network which can help student and university teacher mobility and inter-university cooperation.

3.2 Economic mobility

The European Union’s goal is to build a competitive society, diverse systems of culture, policy, and education may cooperation for further development. It gives European students an opportunity to go aboard and study in universities several semesters when they are expected to promote academic abilities and professional skills.

The Erasmus students make a significant contribution to international tourism and the strongest international tourism motivation is to ‘studying’. Despite economic recession, exchange students and educational travel grow steadily and continuously, and could go beyond the annual growth rate of leisure and business travel.

Specifically, the Erasmus students choose to travel due to several reasons. The first reason is the increase of students’ motivation of leisure. The second is that exchange students be given financial support such as scholarship which can support them to pursue a vacation. Thirdly, the Erasmus students do promote the domestic tourism.

3.3 Social integration

Though some researchers states that there are conflicts between social and transnational opening when individualises. In fact, the Erasmus programme promotes the social integration European integration processes.

The Erasmus program aims to promote further student mobility in European Union member states. In 1980s, a long-term plan was defined that finally 10% of European students could spend a period of their study in another country of the European Union. If there were around 6,000,000 universities graduates, the annual number of the Erasmus students could be one hundred and fifty thousand.

A number of supportive measures have been proposed in order to ensure the sustainable development of the Erasmus programme, which can also promote social integration. An advisory institution of the Erasmus programme is established, which purpose is to discuss principles, operation modes and successes and problems. The Erasmus programme provides scholarships to exchange students, which cover the costs of travel, living, and language courses and so on. It also creates a credits transfer system so that students’ credits can transfer easier and simpler. Moreover, Erasmus programme provide an opportunity for academic and administrative staff to visits other universities in Europe.

4. Political level

The political level is one of important aspects of student mobility. The Erasmus student programme is also an important part of the European citizens and consciousness’ process. It seizes upon these opportunities which neo-liberalism brings, and promotes social equality and justice. Therefore, the political level of student mobility can be classified into two main categories: European citizen and European consciousness, and neo-liberalism and socio-democratic traditions.

4.1 European citizen and European consciousness

Educational mobility can permit further advances in science and technology and it can enhance cohesion and sense of belonging. The cultural diversity of Europe has long existed, and the movement of culture is important to meet the re-
quirements of the new era. One of the advantages of Europe is that it has a broad and profound cultural background. This statement shows that education may become a means to enhance the cohesion and sense of belonging of the European Union, and economic rationality alone cannot achieve. It points out that the direction of European development is closely related to European citizens, and cultivates a sense of European belonging and identity. The policy of transnational education is more effective and profound than the utilitarian method, such as economic means. This seems to bring to the surface traditional considerations between education, the formation of society and governing, resting on assumptions about the malleability of ‘subjects’, whose formation in schools is of crucial importance to the future of societies. Education as a site then becomes vital in the exercise of technologies of citizenship.

Student mobility is related to student's experience of transnational education, which is believed to be the cause of the emergence of European citizens. Student mobility is regarded as a decisive experience in life, which can expand the scope of students’ activities. It allows young people in Europe to get first-hand experience, meanwhile, generate solidarity between Europeans. From 1988, the European Union’s main purpose is defined as to develop citizen awareness, to increase awareness of social and political issues, strengthen the understanding of European history and culture. European identity is contextually bound and surfaces more frequently during transnational experiences and encounters with international peers (Esther et al., 2020).

In this process, the host country's language learning plays an important role. Language can enhance mutual understanding, become a prerequisite of labour market mobility, and increase the economic competitiveness. The student mobility can not only significantly improve the learners’ language ability, but also the social relations between them and other cultures. Through language learning, learners will be aware of the diversity of language and culture as a component of the European identity, so that they will respect and understand other languages and cultures. The purpose of European language policy is to enable each European citizen to speak at least two foreign languages. Therefore, the Erasmus student programme is a significant part of the European citizens’ process.

4.2 Neo-liberalism and socio-democratic traditions

Some researchers argue that European citizenship is established to strengthen the citizen as the economic subject, therefore, it provides evidence of the economic concept of European citizens. The European Union documents affirm this analysis, and states that the primary authority granted to citizens are the right to travel and reside in other member states. In 1994, the European Commission claimed that European citizens have the right to work, travel, and reside in any member states they would like to. It highlights the relationship between the student mobility and economy, and reflects the mutual competition between the neo-liberal economic and social democratic tradition.

In terms of policy, the neo-liberals advocate a minimalist state, connected to the instrumental values of competition and choice. It depends on the naturalization of the logic of the market, and based on personal autonomy and social efficiency (Papatsiba, 2009). It advocates the principle of global trade liberalization, and applies equally to goods and services, including education. Neo-liberalism interprets global interoperability in a particular way, as a purpose of social process. It steers people and institutions face to subjective consciousness of the change of global and economy (Papatsiba, 2009). As a result, it develops not only the fact of global interconnection, but also the values attached to interpretation. In this way, the neo-liberalism is highly regulated and linked to our collective consciousness, and it will bring new business opportunities once been valued as public goods. European Union seize upon these opportunities, with its higher education institutions recognising how the global knowledge economy promotes global mobility for higher education, and who considered the value of international knowledge networks in largely economic terms.

European policies on student mobility were arguably developed within this neo-liberal imaginary. Traditionally, student mobility because of the travel interest, greater freedom, possibilities of permanent residence, and so on. However, what the European universities recognised early was that a new set of factors linked to the neo-liberal imaginary, for example, better employment prospects and the value of educational mobility in the global labour.

5. Conclusion

This article takes the Erasmus programme as an object of case study, which is a classic case of international student mobility and has made great achievements so far.

It illustrates that individual accounts of student mobility are stories of ‘individualisation’ and ‘do-it your-self’ biographies. Student mobility can bring academic benefits, career benefits to students and develop their self-cognition and social adaptability. However, student mobility is not only limited in individual aspect, and it also has other different dimensions, which are socio-economic dimensions and political dimensions. The socio-economic level consists of 3 aspects: labour market, economic mobility and the social conflict and integration, and the political level is divided into
student mobility, the Erasmus programme can be used to study other further issues about globalisation and education. Furthermore, as a classic case of international socio-economic dimensions and political dimensions. An international student mobility programme, such as the Erasmus programme, was at the origin of personal development of self-cognition and personal identity. Moreover, international student mobility reinforces the individual belief of agency: being able to face changing environments, self-monitoring, taking control of one’s life path in a reflexive way, accepting risks bearing individual gains, and so on.

From socio-economic dimension, educational mobility produced by the Erasmus programmes may play an important role to influence students’ decision about labour market mobility. It can be pointed out that even short-term student exchange programmes have a profound impact on further labour market mobility. Furthermore, the integration of the labour market also brings the integration of intellectual resources through social network. Secondly, the Erasmus students make a significant contribution to international tourism. Despite economic recession, exchange students and educational travel grow steadily and continuously. Finally, the Erasmus programme promotes the social integration European integration processes.

In political level, education may become a means to enhance the cohesion and sense of belonging of the European Union, and economic rationality alone cannot achieve. The foundational objectives of ERASMUS are related to consolidate the conception of a People’s Europe, and student mobility is the cornerstone of European Citizenship and European awareness. International student mobility can be instilled increasing European consciousness through the connection with new culture and society. In the next place, neo-liberalism develops not only the fact of global interconnection, but also the values attached to interpretation. In this way, the neo-liberalism is highly regulated and linked to our collective consciousness, and it will bring new business opportunities once been valued as public goods. European Union seize upon these opportunities, with its higher education institutions recognising how the global knowledge economy promotes global student mobility for higher education, and who considered the value of international knowledge networks in largely economic terms. In addition, European citizens may develop into the normative category of choice and promote social equality and justice.

To sum up, student mobility is not only limited in individual aspect, but also has other different dimensions, such as socio-economic dimensions and political dimensions. An international student mobility programme, such as the Erasmus programme, may have profound impact on all aspects of society. Furthermore, as a classic case of international student mobility, the Erasmus programme can be used to study other further issues about globalisation and education.

References


