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EMPIRIC STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC MOBILITY IN KOSOVO AND ITS IMPAC ON DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. The background of the research presented in the paper lies in the divergence between the observations of international student mobility in the context of the internationalization of higher educations by the EU and universities on one hand and international students' motivations for study abroad in general. The research is based on four main case studies of Universities in Kosovo, Bulgaria, Sweden, and Poland including here also other exchange students from different continents such as Australia and Oceania (Fiji), Asia(India), Africa(South Africa), etc. A survey with some questions is designed and 272 responses from students on Erasmus+ mobilities are collected in 2020 and analyzed. This paper explains the students' experience abroad in terms of their intercultural competencies and skills, their shape of identities, the achievement and transfer of knowledge, the possible forming of multicultural mindsets, perceptions of employability, and their future mobility aspirations. This research also considers the barriers and factors of mobility, perceptions of risk and uncertainty with regards to mobility. [1] The special phenomenon of the COVID 19 pandemic which coincides with the period of the study is also examined and researched as an unprecedented phenomenon which appeared to have psychological and economic consequences worldwide including here exchange students. This research confirms that student experiences, skills, the gain of knowledge abroad and the internationalization efforts of universities and the EU would benefit a lot from the introduction of education for global nationality, which should focus on the intercultural competencies of students. [2]

Keywords: Erasmus, Mobility ,Students ,University, Knowledge, Exchange students.

1. Introduction

The background of this research paper lies in the divergence between the observations of international student mobility in the context of the internationalization of higher educations by the EU and universities on one hand and international students' motivations for study abroad in general. [3] .The research is based on four main case studies of Universities in Kosovo, Bulgaria, Sweden, and Poland including here also other exchange students from different continents such as: Fiji, India, South Africa etc. A survey with 12 questions is designed and 272 responses from students on Erasmus+ mobilities are collected in 2020 and analyzed. [4] It explains the students' experience abroad in terms of their intercultural competences and skills, their shape of identities, the achievement and transfer of knowledge, the possible forming of multicultural mindsets, perceptions of employability and their future mobility aspirations. This research also considers the barriers and factors of mobility, perceptions of risk and uncertainty with regards to mobility. The special phenomenon of the COVID 10 pandemic which coincides with the period of the study is examined. [5]

This research paper concludes that student experiences, skills, gain of knowledge abroad and the internationalization efforts of universities and the EU would benefit a lot from the introduction of education for global nationality, which should focus on the intercultural competencies of students. [6] The thesis shows how elements as the multicultural mindset can improve the economic, academic and political grounds of internationalization, employability and trade markets in general. The results of the study will help International Relation Officers (IROs) to define better their policy for achieving higher mobility rates and better satisfaction of the students participating [7]

2. Methodology

The research paper applies a mixed method research design, which combines, collects and analyses both quantitative and qualitative methods in a methodology of a single study in order to understand the research problem; as well as, to address the research gaps in the field of International Students Mobility (ISM) and the IoU in Balkan Countries and Europe. The mixed method approach combines quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, and it refers to pragmatism as the way of claiming knowledge. [8] The main distinction between the quantitative and qualitative data collections techniques is that the first is characteristic to numeric (numbers) and the later to non-numeric (words) data, which is called

for by the literature on ISM. Different methods are employable within one study for different purposes and at different stages of research, for example interviews at an exploratory phase and a questionnaire for gathering descriptive or explanatory data. [9]

The research methodology implemented includes survey design, definition of target groups, data collection, data processing and analysis and key findings.

3. Qualitative Method throughout the case study and analysis from empirical data

The first version of the survey included 20 questions and it was probated with 10 students in Technical University of Sofia from Italy, Bulgaria, Kosovo and Albania. It was realized face-to-face in combination with interviews. Then a more compact version composed by 12 questions was defined. This version was published in google forms and widely distributed. Most of the questions offered a set of predefined answers, but some were open question. [10]

Target groups

The survey was distributed in four universities as follows: University for Business and Technology UBT, Pristina in Kosovo, Technical University of Sofia in Bulgaria, Warsaw University in Poland and Linnaeus University in Sweden. The focus of collecting these data was mostly to bachelor, masters or researchers who were part of any International Credit Mobility Programme at least once.

Data Collecting

The survey was open for respondents during the year 2020, which coincided strongly with the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon. This gave the unique opportunity to study the impact of this unexpected and very significant phenomenon on student's mobility. A total of 272 responses were collected. [11]

Data processing and analysis

The numerical data from the survey was processed with google drive. The texted data from opened questions was manually translated to and excel file. The results achieved by this survey are included in the following paragraphs with the results and analysis of the survey data. Interviews and meetings with involved individuals in ICM Programmes were also elaborated and analyzed. [12]

Key Findings

Key finding are extracted from the answers and the data collected with the survey questionnaire.

Case Study

This document reports the Study of International Academic Mobility (IAM) and its impact on Development of a successful, structured approach to using the case study methodology as master thesis research. The survey is designed for master study for students' staff and individuals who have at least one time taken part in an international mobility semester. In order to generate concusions focusing more on IAM, I have prepared a questionnaire with 12 questions related to it and distributed to exchange students on three different Universities. The questionnaire was sent by email prepared on a google form, and also, I have distributed a printed one, after gathered and generated the data. [13]

Further the questions of the survey, the options suggested and the repartition of answers are presented.

Question 1. Which program are you currently enrolled in?

The repetition of the respondents in different study programs where they are enrolled is presented in Figure 7.

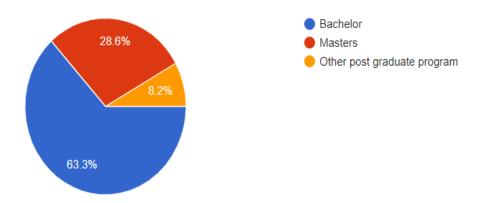


Figure 1. Repartition of the respondents in different study programs

Analysis of the answers collected for Question 1.

From the graph with the responses to the first question, we see that there is a mixed of exchange students who at least one time were part of an exchange program mostly in Bachelor level with 63.3%, Master students with 28.6% and other post graduate programs 8.2%. Still the highest percentage is of bachelor ones taking here in consideration that most of them are not working, are young and free to travel and explore different study experiences. Yet from the interviews and experiences there is a big wish for master students to study

abroad but most of them hesitating for some reasons such as: starting a job, focusing more on finding a job or internship rather than travelling abroad and studying in a foreign country. As for post graduate program there is a lower percentage of people because of limited scholarship possibilities and also work and other personal engagements. [14]

Question 2. Name your home institution where you come from and what are you studying?

In this question the main focus was to see exactly which countries and Universitas are oriented to go international, we see that there were students from different countries open to experiment and upgrade with the academic career including students from other continents (Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America) as: South Africa, Fiji, China, Mongolia, Lebanon and Mexico. These students were at least one time engaged in an International Exchange study programme and what we can identify at this point is that mostly they are from Europe but also other continents countries are open and willing to always search for exchange programs in Balkans and Europe. [15]

Question 3. Name the University you did your mobility?

In Figure 8 is presented the repartition of the host universities where the respondents realized their Erasmus+ mobilities.

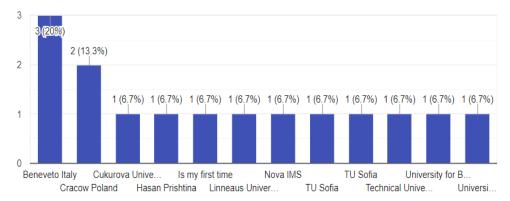


Figure 2. Host institutions indicated by the respondents

Analysis of the answers collected for Question 3.

As mentioned in the previous question the focus of European and Central Balkan counties is studying in one of the nearest country and Europe. In this regard they are aware for the offers and the quality of studies in these Universitas therefore their choices are as below: With the highest percentage are ranked Italy and Sweden, then Poland and Germany, Bulgaria and also Portugal. From the interview I had with most of them their answers were

different, on the reasons why they choose a certain country is it because of the high quality of studies, because of the sympathy they have for a certain country and so on. [16]

Question 4. What is your sex?

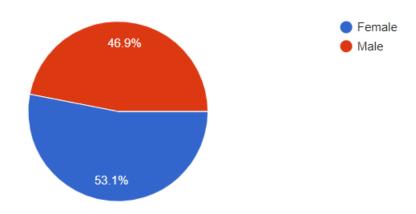


Figure 3. Gender repartition of the respondents

Analysis of the answers collected for Question 4.

In this graph from Figure 9 we see that the highest percentage from the interviewers who have taken part in an International Exchange study programme is Female with 53.1% and Men with 46.9%. From interviews and meeting I had in continuity with different exchange students and potential ones to the question that why do you think that Women are more interested in doing an exchange is they think women are more interested in exporting different methods of teaching, in travelling, sharing and getting to know different cultures, and for men is more challenging to get out of their comfort zone and try something new. [17]

Question 5. Who encouraged you to stagy abroad?

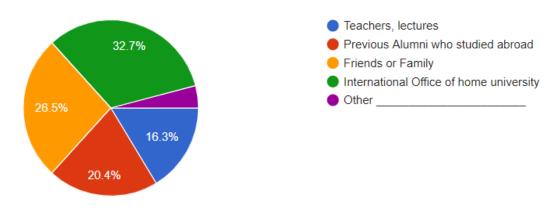


Figure 4. Repartition of the sources of encouragement for mobility

Analysis of the answers collected for Question 5.

One of the key issues is for sure has a huge impact on encouraging and pushing students to go abroad for a year or semester are different acters who play a very important role. Figure 10 shows that Teachers, Alumni, Friends and Family have an impact at this stage by trying to raise awareness on the importance of International Study Aboard Exchange programmes. From the interviews and the questioners, we see that they have ranked with the highest percentage the International Office at their home institutions who are in continuity informing and promoting the Study Abroad Importance. With a percentage of 32.7% they rank the international office of their home institution as one of the greatest acters to push them study abroad. Friends and family were ranked with 26.5% which is considerable percentage. The third most important actor with a percentage of 20.4% are the previous alumni who have shown their best experiences and encouraged them to apply and be part of exchange programmes at least ones. 16.3% at this point I would say that the International Office should raise more awareness at Teachers and lecturers in order to motivate and encourage students to seek and search every possibility to study abroad at least once. And a lower percentage is answered as others including here personal reasons such as relatives living in a certain country, marriage and then studying at the same country and similar[18]

Question 6. What are your main benefits of the Exchange Program?

This is an open question and the answers obtained by the respondents are analyzed.

Based on their answers we see that they are are mainly close to each other and they categorize their answers mostly benefiting on: networking, language skills, new teaching and learning techniques, new digital skills, the lifestyle, new courses they couldn't study at their home universities, working in groups brain storming and sharing knowledge and best practices with each other, international experience in general. They emphasize on the student-professor interaction and the communication, their commitment and encouragement to study and succeed, new language and cross-cultural issues, widening their knowledge and creating more international possibilities, university extracurricular activities were also one of the benefits they have answered as a key factor to motivate them take them out of their study routine. [19] Their exchange was beneficial as it helped them to grow intellectually and as individuals, and become more and more independent especially for those who left their houses for the first time this was one of the best times to help them adopt in a new environment different culture and way of living by taking their own risks

and responsibilities. For most of them this experience helped them to advance their career and get better chances while they are seeking a new job. [20]

Question 7. How your studies and placement were arranged?

Studies placement is one of the key factors when it comes to complete the exchange application package.

Figure 11 shows that 81% of the respondents admit that their application process went through their home university, this referees how much universities are paying attention on promoting and encouraging students to study abroad. The rest of it answered they have applied directly to the host university meaning they could have been informed by surfing in internet for the scholarship possibilities or similar. Referring this question from interviews we understand the huge role that the international office at their home institution plays while they are applying and getting ready to start a totally new era of living and teaching. Starting from the application process, continuing with all needed procedures such as completing the learning agreement, accommodation, visa issues, flight tickets meetings and continuous communication till they arrive they see it as one of the crustal issues and they encourage the International Offices to keep doing such a great job as for them is very helpful and needed. They recommend that the International Office should be one of the biggest offices in order to be able and make sure they have the sufficient amount of people to assist. [21]

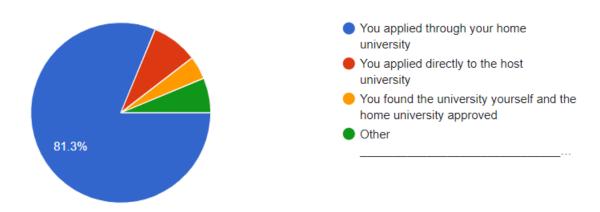


Figure 5 Arrangement of studies and placement

Question 8. Did you sign the learning agreement and other documents before or after your arrival to the host University?

Learning Agreement is one of the most important steps for International Exchange students. Learning Agreement is a document which is prepared in accordance of both institutions home and host that allows the transfer of learning experiences between the two institutions involved in the mobility.

The learning Agreement sets out the programme to be followed abroad and must be approved by the student, the sending and receiving institution before they start their exchange. In our case the Learning Agreement should set out the group of educational components/courses that will be replaced in the student's home institution as a competition of the study programme abroad. The three parties, the student, home and host university commit to comply with all the agreed arrangements, thereby ensuring that the student will receive the recognition for the studies carried out abroad without any further requirements. (EU website)

Analysis of the answers collected for Question 8.

The graph from Figure 12 shows that 81% of students sign the Learning Agreement before they start their mobility and this is very important actually and as it's required, with this they make sure the courses they choose are applicable and they will be transfer end and replaced at their home institution once they finish their exchange. 18% of them answered they have signed the Learning Agreement after they have arrived to the host institution for some reasons, because of the limited time to arrive on time, because they needed more time to specify and define the courses. Still my recommendations in order to avoid all the misunderstandings and the irrelevance of selecting wrong courses the Learning Agreement should be signed before the student starts the mobility.

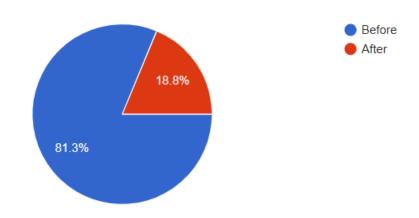


Figure 6. Time of signature of the LA

Question 9. Did you have any problems regarding the following when preparing to study abroad?

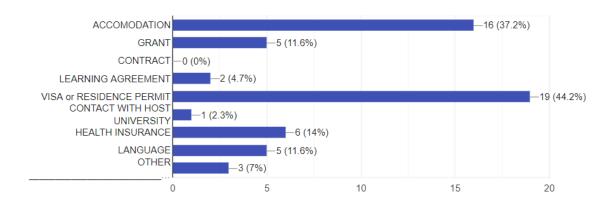


Figure 7.Problems when preparing to study abroad

The preparation of mobility in general for most of the students it's a bit challenging which passes through some difficulties and stressful etapes. Based on the questions answered the most challenging issue for Kosovar students with 44.2% was the visa issue. The other issue which was most challenging for them seemed to be the accommodation, in this they referd the difficulties in finding a proper house to live and the difficulties in adapting in different environment. Health Insurance, Language gaps, Grant and other challenges were ranked with a lower percentage but still for some of them a gap which made their preparations a bit challenging.

Question 10. What motivated you the most study abroad?

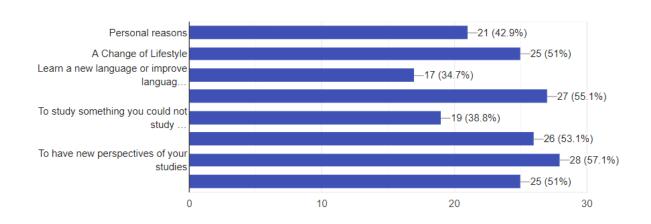


Figure 8. Motivation to study abroad

The Motivation and encouragement for students to study abroad are the key factors. Figure 14 shows the motivation to study abroad that the respondents shared.

Analysis of the answers collected for Question 10.

Most of them have at least once heard for the benefits that International Exchange Programmes but most of the times hesitate to apply and take the risk to change the way of living and studying to another country. Asked on what motivated them the most on making this decision they answered with 57.1% to have a new perspective of their studies, 55.1% to learn a new language and improve their English language skills, change of lifestyle, personal reasons, to study something they could not study at their home university, were also some of the reasons that motivated most of them to do their exchange.

Question 11. Did COVID - 19 affect your mobility? If yes add your comments?

The questioners were distributed before the COVID 19 started to flood the world. So fortunately, most of exchange have been already doing their exchange or at least started.

There were few of them who for this reason were not able to travel but still they completed their mobility online. Those who were not able to even start their mobilities were postponed for the next year. Below there are some of the students who experienced the lockdown in a host university.

"My name is Carmen Compare. I'm a computer engineering student from University of Sannio, and I did the Erasmus+ program at Technical University of Sofia. When I arrived in Sofia in the end of January, I didn't expect the situation that I had experiencing. The experience I had dreamed of, was changing and it prevented me from doing some things I wanted to do. In the beginning I was really scared. Afterwards I received a lot of help, from my university and from the university that is hosting me. The Technical University of Sofia has immediately guaranteed online lessons. It wasn't certainly not the same as following live lessons, but it was still a new experience.

Despite the difficulties, I feel that this situation is making me grow from the student point of view and from the person point of view. I think I 'm lucky to have had the chance to feel like an Erasmus student anyway, and Sofia welcomed me very well."

"My name is Francesco's Covid-19 pandemic had a great impact on my Erasmus. I arrived in Sofia in the moment in which there were the first cases in Italy. Fortunately, the virus hit Bulgaria later, but I was worried for all the time (looking at the situation in Italy) and fortunately, the Bulgarian government acted in time to avoid big problems. Is for this reason that me and other guys remained in Bulgaria instead of coming back at home. The quarantine period was hard in the beginning but it helped me a lot in increasing the friendship with guys from my dormitory but it also helped me in making me feel more responsible about my actions and my way of living. Fortunately, I had all the support from my home University in Benevento and from the Technical University and the teacher here were professional and

ready for help also through lessons online and email. The days sometimes were a little bit boring or empty in the beginning but I managed them better during the weeks".

Question 12. What could be improved for the future, of the joint cooperation between universities? Your recommendations

Potential improvements have been mentioned and addressed by students in different areas such as: Grants, promoting, longer exchange period of stay, cheaper and better places to live, more possibilities and scholarships for students, grants to be delivered on time, more flexible on obtaining a visa when needed, learning agreement to be accepted fully, eliminate the cross boarder issues and move and live freely in countries they choose to study without any barrier, and promote more the possibilities and offers they have.

Concluding here to the main universities, where questionaries were distributed to their students we see more or less similarities on challenges and hinderances especially during these COVID hard times. Still the processes and activates did not stop even though there was a pandemic time.

Conclusion

Internationalization represents a phenomenon of interest to a particularly broad cross-section of higher education institutions in all parts of the world. This is a notable development (particularly) of the last two decades. From a relatively marginal position on the agendas of institutions, nations, and international organizations, internationalization has acquired a significant profile at the highest levels of policy-making and institutional leadership in many corners of the world. This has been driven by a very real sense of the opportunities and imperatives inherent in the phenomenon. The perception is that much can be gained by attending to the international dimension. [22]

To be sure, the potential to bring about positive change through internationalization in such areas as relevance, quality, and prestige is quite exciting. All signs point to the fact that it makes little sense for institutions to choose out of international engagement altogether. Indeed, internationalization is affecting what, how, where, and from whom students learn; how higher education institutions and systems comprehend their missions and roles how research is carried out and disseminated and how fundamental paradigms of cooperation and competition in higher education are understood and elaborated. [23]

The complex and shifting landscape of internationalization, along with the speed with which new developments present themselves in the current context, makes managing internationalization strategies and their practical components extremely challenging.

Presented with a world of opportunities but only limited resources, this is a most daunting task. Making informed and creative choices about internationalization—with a clear sense of the interplay between risks and benefits, opportunities and imperatives, obstacles and resources—requires unique skills and talents, real vision, and sustained commitment. [24] Now going back to the results generated from this research we conclude the importance of internationalization and mobilities in general both inter-institutional and others as a key factor on raising and building capacities for universities and individuals. The combination of these study curriculums, experiences, interdisciplinary cultures and practices seems to be the future of universities for a better international ranking level, which needs to be taken in consideration as a key factor to expand and widen even more its functions, in order to compete universities activities. [25]

Under these conditions what we conclude is that internationalization significantly increases interactions among diverse people, ideas and perspectives in general, leading to enhanced knowledge production and the fulfilment of higher education's fundamental's purpose.

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