

MOBILITY OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS FOR THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The internationalization of higher education is a key strategy for enhancing academic quality, fostering cross-cultural understanding, and improving global competitiveness. A central component of this process is the mobility of teachers and students, which facilitates knowledge exchange, curriculum innovation, and institutional collaboration. Teacher mobility enhances pedagogical practices, research cooperation, and professional development, while student mobility provides exposure to diverse learning environments, strengthens intercultural competencies, and improves employability in a globalized workforce. However, challenges such as funding constraints, recognition of credits, and socio-cultural adaptation persist. This abstract discusses the benefits, challenges, and policy considerations surrounding academic mobility, emphasizing its role in shaping a more interconnected and dynamic higher education landscape.

The study employs qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with teaching staff, focus groups with students, and document analysis. These methods aim to identify the types and frequency of mobility programs utilized at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje over the past year.

1. Introduction

In the context of increasing globalization and the internationalization of higher education, the mobility of faculty and students has become an increasingly relevant and significant issue. Mobility does not merely imply the physical crossing of borders, but also openness to new academic experiences, cultural diversity, and social networking. In recent decades, student mobility has been affirmed as an effective means of promoting intercultural dialogue, academic cooperation, and the development of knowledge that transcends national boundaries. Within the European Union, academic mobility of both faculty and students is primarily supported through programs such as Erasmus+, CEEPUS, DAAD, among others. These programs provide opportunities for faculty and students to pursue part of their education abroad, granting them access to new academic content, the development of personal and professional skills, and the enhancement of their overall competences.

Building on the above, the purpose of this paper is to explore the different dimensions of university mobility, with particular emphasis on its academic, cultural, social, and financial aspects. Through an analysis of available data, reports, and case examples, the paper identifies the key benefits of participation in mobility, as well as the challenges and constraints faced by both faculty and students. Special attention is devoted to students' motivation for mobility, the barriers to greater participation, and the role of higher education institutions and state policies in fostering mobility. Finally, the paper offers recommendations and guidelines for improving practices and policies in this field, particularly in the national context as a country in the process of European integration.

2. The concept of student mobility

Student mobility represents the process of physical, digital, or hybrid movement of students from their home institution to another institution, most often abroad, with the aim of acquiring academic knowledge, practical experience, or engaging in cultural exchange for a limited period of time. The mobility of both students and teaching staff can take various forms, including short-term or long-term academic stays, internships, research projects, virtual collaboration, and professional exchange programs. In this regard, the European Commission defines student mobility as “a temporary educational experience outside the home institution, aimed at improving academic competences, intercultural skills, and professional prospects” (European Commission, 2020). Within this context, mobility is considered one of the key components of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA),

whose ultimate goal is to establish a competitive, transparent, and compatible educational system at the European level.

In the scholarly literature, the concept of student mobility is not examined solely as a tool for educational development but also as a means of promoting European values, inclusion, and transnational cooperation. According to Brandenburg and de Wit (2011), mobility should not be assessed only by the number of students studying abroad, but also by the quality of their experiences, the support they receive, and the impact on their subsequent academic and professional trajectories, as well as the experience they bring back to their home country. Furthermore, UNESCO (2019) emphasizes that mobility is intrinsically linked to the notions of global citizenship, sustainable development, and the internationalization of knowledge, as it enables access to diverse academic cultures, fosters critical thinking, enhances linguistic and intercultural competences, and broadens personal and professional horizons.

At the same time, the notion of student mobility increasingly encompasses virtual forms of exchange, which have emerged in response to global crises (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic), but also as a way to include students who, due to financial, family-related, or other constraints, cannot engage in physical mobility (Beelen & Jones, 2015). While this form of exchange has not yet reached its full potential, compared to its relatively recent emergence, it has already seen a significant increase in interest, particularly among younger generations. Consequently, it can be concluded that student mobility is not a uniform concept, but rather an evolving phenomenon shaped by political, economic, and technological circumstances, as well as by the capacity of higher education institutions to provide quality and inclusive mobility opportunities for all students.

3. Mobility Programs – Historical Development

The history of student mobility has deep roots, dating back to the medieval period, when universities in Paris, Oxford, and Bologna attracted students from various parts of Europe. These early forms of academic mobility were primarily driven by the desire to gain access to prestigious scholars and specialized fields of knowledge that were not widely available (Teichler, 2004). At that time, mobility was largely reserved for elite social groups and had a limited scope. With the emergence of nation-states and the development of national education systems in the 19th and 20th centuries, student mobility declined, shifting its focus toward internal academic structures.

The Erasmus program, launched in 1987, developed into the largest and most successful student exchange program worldwide. To date, more than 10 million students have participated in Erasmus and, later, Erasmus+, making this initiative a symbol of European academic mobility and intercultural dialogue (European Commission, 2020).

In recent decades, alongside the development of the Erasmus program, other significant initiatives have been introduced, contributing to the expansion of mobility opportunities for both students and academic staff at regional and global levels. These will be further elaborated in the following sections.

4. Types of Mobility Programs

Mobility in higher education can be categorized into several types. The most common form is **credit mobility**, where students complete a portion of their studies abroad and transfer the earned credits back to their home institution (King & Raghuram, 2013). Another important form is **degree mobility**, in which students pursue a full academic program leading to a diploma or degree in a host country (OECD, 2024a). In addition, **staff mobility** has gained increasing importance, enabling academic and administrative personnel to engage in teaching, training, or professional development abroad (European Commission, 2020). These different modalities of mobility not only foster academic enrichment but also contribute to intercultural understanding, personal development, and the internationalization of higher education systems.

5. Institutional Support for Mobility in the Republic of North Macedonia

The key institution for promoting and supporting mobility in the RN Macedonia is the **National Agency for European Educational Programs and Mobility**, established in 2009. (*Law on the Establishment of the National Agency for European Educational Programs and Mobility*, 2007). The mission of the Agency is to promote and implement European programs in the fields of education, training, youth, and sport within the Republic. Initially, the country participated in the Lifelong Learning and Youth in Action programs. Since 2014, the activities of these initiatives have been integrated into the new Erasmus+ program (2014–2020), and currently into Erasmus+ (2021–2027) (National Agency for European Educational Programs and Mobility, 2023).

Since 2014, the Republic of Macedonia has held the status of a *Programme Country* within Erasmus+, granting students, academic staff, and youth organizations full access to the opportunities offered by the program (European Commission, 2024). Between 2014 and 2019, a total of 2,214 mobilities (students and academic staff)

were recorded, increasing from 283 mobilities in 2014 to 980 in 2019—an overall growth of more than 300% (National Agency for European Educational Programs and Mobility, 2023). It is also significant to highlight that Macedonia's accession to the Bologna Process in 2003 facilitated the adoption of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), thereby enhancing the process of academic recognition (European Commission, 2024).

Another important initiative is the **Central European Exchange Program for University Studies (CEEPUS)**, a regional mobility scheme among Central and Southeastern European countries, launched in 1995. Its primary aim is to foster regional academic cooperation by supporting student and staff mobility, as well as through the creation of university networks known as *academic networks* (CEEPUS, 2024). Unlike other programs, CEEPUS operates on bilateral and multilateral agreements between universities, without requiring prior approval at the European Commission level. RN Macedonia has been part of CEEPUS since 1997, with several universities participating, including Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje.

Beyond European initiatives, bilateral and international scholarship programs funded by national governments, foundations, and embassies also play a vital role in supporting mobility. Among the most prominent are Fulbright, DAAD, and Chevening, as well as programs funded by the French Institute, the Swiss Government, and other international bodies. Similarly, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) is one of the largest international funding organizations supporting academic mobility worldwide. Through DAAD, Macedonian students and researchers may apply for scholarships for undergraduate, master's, doctoral, and postdoctoral studies in Germany, as well as for summer schools and short-term research stays (DAAD, 2023). In 2022 alone, more than 800 students and researchers from the Western Balkans were funded through DAAD programs.

Other opportunities available to Macedonian students include the Swiss Government Excellence Scholarships, the Eiffel Excellence Scholarships (France), the China Scholarship Council programs, and the Visegrad Fund. The British Council, the Open Society Foundation and other international institutions have also played an important role in providing academic opportunities for students and researchers from transitional countries, including RN Macedonia. Through various scholarship schemes, these organizations have supported academic mobility, capacity building, and participation in international academic events (British Council, 2023).

Collectively, these initiatives, along with bilateral agreements and national scholarship schemes, significantly expand the framework of available mobility opportunities. In some cases, these programs are tailored to specific academic fields or partner countries, ensuring greater flexibility and inclusiveness in mobility opportunities.

6. Empirical research on student and staff mobility

In order to deepen the understanding of motivations, barriers, and perceptions related to student mobility, in addition to a literature review, a qualitative empirical study was conducted through three focus groups with students from the Faculty of Philosophy at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. Each focus group consisted of eight students. The study was carried out in May 2025. The participants were first-year students enrolled in the study programs of Pedagogy and Social Work and Social Policy. Selection was based on the students' expressed willingness to participate in the study, as well as their demonstrated interest in mobility programs (e.g., Erasmus+, CEEPUS).

The focus group discussions were guided by questions concerning: interest in studying at other universities (where, when, for how long, and in what form); previous international experiences; perceived benefits of mobility; barriers such as linguistic, financial, curricular, recognition of courses, family-related, or personal obstacles; and recommendations to the faculty for improving institutional practices in this field.

The results reveal that students are primarily motivated to participate in exchange programs by: Academic advancement and the opportunity to gain new knowledge and skills; Travel and intercultural exchange, which broaden personal and professional horizons; Perceptions of higher quality teaching and infrastructure at foreign universities.

At the same time, students identified several key challenges that hinder participation, including: Financial uncertainty, especially regarding additional living and travel expenses; Administrative complications related to the recognition of courses and credits; Insufficient institutional support from domestic universities and relevant agencies.

The following section presents a synthesis of the identified advantages and challenges of student mobility, systematized on the basis of both the literature review and participants' reflections. This is followed by selected verbatim quotations from the focus group discussions, which provide illustrative insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of the students.

7. Advantages of Student Mobility

7.1. Personal and academic development of students

Student mobility enables participants to acquire new skills, academic experiences, and greater self-confidence, and to a certain extent, to discover themselves and clarify their aspirations. Living abroad, particularly in a diverse multicultural and academic context, encourages students to step outside their comfort zones, fostering the development of critical thinking, adaptability, and intercultural competence (European Commission, 2023). From an academic perspective, mobility provides access to contemporary teaching methods, resources, and diverse academic viewpoints across institutions. Students participating in programs such as Erasmus+ have the opportunity to attend courses unavailable at their home institutions, as well as to engage in research projects.

7.2. Enrichment of knowledge and cultural exchange

One of the most valuable benefits of student mobility lies in the enrichment of knowledge through exposure to new academic disciplines, teaching approaches, and research practices. Students studying abroad gain access to alternative academic perspectives often unavailable in their home countries, leading to a deeper understanding of their fields of study and an increased openness to diverse academic traditions (Soutar & Turner, 2021). Moreover, mobility fosters direct cultural exchange, as students live and interact with people from different cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds. Such contact promotes the development of intercultural sensitivity and respect for diversity, both of which are essential for successful participation in an increasingly globalized society (Knight, 2004).

7.3. Building Professional Networks and Advancing Internationalization

Mobility also plays a crucial role in the internationalization of higher education and in opening global opportunities for professional development. Time spent in a foreign academic environment allows students to establish connections with professors, researchers, and peers from various countries, often leading to future collaborations, participation in international projects, and access to diverse opportunities for professional growth (Teichler, 2004).

7.4. Mobility as an advantage in the labor market

Perhaps one of the most significant reasons for engaging in student mobility relates to enhanced employability and competitiveness of graduates on the labor market. Participation in mobility programs is often perceived as an indicator of initiative, adaptability, and intercultural competence—qualities that are increasingly valued by employers. (European Commission, 2023).

Young people who study or train abroad not only gain knowledge in specific disciplines, but also strengthen key transversal skills which are highly valued by employers. A large scale study with more than 80000 respondents on the impact of the European Union's Erasmus student exchange programme shows that graduates with international experience fare much better on the job market. They are half as likely to experience long-term unemployment compared with those who have not studied or trained abroad and, five years after graduation, their unemployment rate is 23% lower. (Erasmus Impact Study)

7.5. Motivations for participation in student mobility

Motivations for participation in student mobility are primarily linked to the desire for gaining distinctive and prestigious experience, and “doing something more”, ultimately contributing to the development of a competitive and unique academic profile. (Cuzzocrea & Krzaklewska, 2023). Students engaged in mobility programs are often motivated to construct a “super-mobile” academic profile through multiple stays abroad, thereby enhancing their international value and career prospects (Hof, 2019; Prazeres, 2019).

The statements of students further highlights “professional and personal development” and “career development” as the main motivational factors. These trends reflect a complex “push-pull” dynamic, in which personal ambitions, together with the demands and expectations of the global labor market, play a decisive role (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

8. Challenges and Limitations in Student Mobility

Although student mobility is increasingly recognized as an important mechanism for developing young professionals with global competences, its practical implementation is not without obstacles. A variety of factors – ranging from financial costs and administrative procedures to institutional capacities and support systems – significantly influence students’ access, participation, and success in mobility programs. These barriers are particularly pronounced among students from countries with limited economic and infrastructural resources, as well as in contexts where the internationalization of higher education remains at a relatively low level. Consequently, this chapter aims to analyze and explain the main challenges and limitations that arise within the framework of student exchange programs.

8.1. Financial and Administrative Barriers

The most frequently cited barrier to student mobility is financial inequality. Although programs such as Erasmus+, DAAD, and others provide scholarships, the actual cost of living abroad often exceeds the allocated funds. For instance, students in major European cities are frequently confronted with high expenses for accommodation, food, transportation, and visas, which are not always fully covered. This makes mobility inaccessible for students from socially vulnerable groups, particularly in the absence of additional institutional support (Cairns, 2017; Netz & Finger, 2016).

In addition, administrative procedures – including complex application processes, visa requirements, academic recognition of credits, and the need to secure health insurance – often place a significant burden on students. These bureaucratic obstacles can discourage participation and, in some cases, even lead to withdrawal from mobility opportunities (European Commission, 2020; Soutar & Mazzarol, 2002).

8.2. Linguistic and Cultural Barriers

Although the majority of international programs offer courses in English, many students experience insecurity regarding their language skills, particularly in relation to academic writing and oral presentations. This often leads to fear of failure, reduced engagement in lectures, or avoidance of interaction with peers (Soutar & Turner, 2021).

Cultural differences likewise play a significant role. A phenomenon frequently reported, especially by students who have participated in some form of exchange, is the so-called “*cultural shock*.” This manifests through feelings of isolation, unfamiliar customs, differing communication styles, and even divergent academic norms. Such experiences may affect both the academic performance and psychological well-being of students, particularly during the initial months of their stay abroad.

8.3. Problems with the recognition of courses and academic programs

Despite European efforts toward harmonization through the Bologna Process and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), many students continue to face difficulties in having their completed courses recognized. Such problems arise from inconsistencies in curricula, differences in academic calendars, or insufficient communication between home and host institutions. As a result, some students are required to retake courses upon their return or experience an extension of their studies, which negatively affects their motivation to participate in future mobility programs (Knight, 2004).

Universities that have well-developed learning agreements, as well as practices of automatic recognition of academic achievements, report significantly higher rates of successful mobility outcomes.

8.4. Personal and Family Constraints

Personal circumstances often represent “silent barriers” to student mobility. Students from low-income families, those with caregiving responsibilities for family members, or those with health-related challenges are significantly less likely to participate in exchange programs. In addition, female students, students with children, and those from rural or more conservative backgrounds may face social pressures and expectations that further hinder their participation.

8.5. Risk of remaining abroad

A long-term challenge is the phenomenon of “*brain drain*”, whereby students who participate in mobility programs do not return to their home country. This trend is particularly pronounced in developing states or in countries with limited labor market opportunities. In the case of RN Macedonia, data from the OECD (2024b) indicate that more than 30% of highly qualified young people live and work abroad. This phenomenon produces structural damage to national development, as the state loses both its investment in education and its potential for innovation.

The solution, however, should not lie in restricting mobility, but rather in creating favorable conditions for return. This includes policies for reintegration, recognition of international experience, and the development of a stimulating labor market.

8.6. Positive examples and good practices for overcoming barriers

Some universities have successfully addressed these challenges by introducing preparatory courses, mentoring programs, free legal and administrative support, as well as scholarships for socially vulnerable students. (Lund University in Sweden, the University of Graz in Austria, the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia). These cases stress the importance of institutional support and openness, which significantly enhance both participation rates and student satisfaction during their mobility period.

9. Student perspectives on academic exchange: qualitative insights

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how student mobility is perceived, qualitative data were collected through focus groups. The discussions aimed to capture not only the rational arguments but also the emotions, doubts, and personal reflections connected with the idea of studying abroad. What follows are selected student testimonies, presented in their own words, which vividly illustrate both the enthusiasm and the concerns surrounding student exchanges:

“I think that anyone who has the chance and the desire to go on a student exchange should just go for it right away, without risking losing opportunities that could open up through that experience.”

“From my earlier Erasmus+ projects during high school, I’ve already experienced many of the benefits—new friendships, learning about traditions different from ours, and broadening my horizons. I believe student exchange is a step above regular cultural exchanges. Through it, students can see both the differences and similarities in educational systems and decide what they’d like to change and what they’d like to keep at their universities. They also gain new skills and habits that can make studying easier later on.”

“Studying in another country can really help us get to know ourselves better, gain more confidence, and develop habits for living independently. Both personally and academically, we grow a lot. We get the chance to learn new things and see how life works outside of our country. We meet new people, make new friends and colleagues who make it easier to adapt. And of course, we also get to know a new culture, new customs, new characters, new rules...”

“Exchange and mobility definitely bring challenges, but they also offer so many benefits. Through mobility, students get big opportunities, especially when it comes to employability and developing skills for the future that will help us deal with today’s challenges and whatever the future brings.”

“The main reason young people don’t dare to apply is lack of information. On top of that, there aren’t enough scholarships. And of course, the biggest obstacle is financial costs, especially for students who don’t have many resources.”

“From your own budget, you need to set aside money for transport, accommodation, clothes, academic materials, hygiene products—basically everything you need to live normally. Money is the crucial issue when deciding whether to study abroad. The second big barrier is language, which you really need to improve if you want to communicate well and succeed academically.”

“For me personally, I don’t think I could handle being far away from home and my community. Still, I believe student exchange has big advantages for anyone who’s ready for it.”

“Personally, I don’t have a strong wish to study in another country. I’m afraid of the changes and the challenges I’d have to face on my own. But still, I wouldn’t rule it out completely—if I got a good opportunity, I might go for a little adventure.”

It is clear that while some students are ready to leave immediately if given the opportunity, others feel uncertain, afraid of the unknown, and unwilling to step outside their comfort zone. Their testimonies confirm the ambivalent nature of student mobility: it offers personal and academic growth, yet also exposes the limitations of the domestic system in creating conditions that can sustain this potential. The findings point to the need for stronger institutional support, more transparency in procedures, and clearer career development pathways upon return. At the same time, building trust in the domestic system—through improving the quality of higher education and creating real opportunities for young professionals—remains crucial. These results serve as an indicator of the current situation and highlight the need for further, broader studies using a quantitative approach.

10. Mobility at the Faculty of Philosophy, Skopje in the Academic Year 2023/24 – Quantitative Data

In the academic year 2023/24, during both the winter and summer semesters, students of the Faculty of Philosophy participated in mobility programs within Erasmus+ and CEEPUS, studying in Lithuania, Croatia, Italy, and Austria. Additionally, 17 students engaged in outgoing mobility on other grounds (summer schools and project activities) at foreign universities. The share of students who participated in mobility from the total student population was 1.1% at the first cycle and 4% at the third cycle. No data indicate that second-cycle students took part in mobility programs through the Faculty, which highlights the need for greater attention to this area in the future.

With regard to staff mobility, the opportunities appear to have been more extensively utilized. Based on interviews and document analysis, it was found that in the academic year 2023/24, 20 professors from the Faculty of Philosophy participated in mobility through Erasmus and CEEPUS, delivering guest lectures at foreign universities. Furthermore, a total of 137 outgoing mobilities of academic staff were realized on other grounds (participation in international conferences, project activities, and professional development), of which 92 took place abroad and 79 within the country.

11. Conclusion

Mobility represents one of the most significant processes of the internationalization of higher education, enabling knowledge transfer, cultural exchange, and personal development. Mobility programs offer important opportunities for students, yet access to these programs is not equal for all, due to a range of constraints. Among the main advantages highlighted in this paper are the improvement of academic and language skills, increased self-confidence, the building of international networks, and greater competitiveness in the labor market. However, numerous obstacles and barriers remain, such as financial costs, administrative complexity, language barriers, incomplete academic recognition, and the risk of remaining in the host country.

12. Recommendations

To enhance the mobility of both students and academic staff, a systemic approach is needed that addresses the entire process—from information and preparation, through implementation, to reintegration after the mobility period.

First, it is essential to strengthen institutional support. Universities should establish functional and well-organized mobility offices that ensure clear administrative protocols, continuous assistance with applications, and effective mentoring support for students. Such offices should act as a bridge between the student, the program, and the host institution.

In addition, expanding financial accessibility is a key step toward ensuring equal participation. Introducing additional national and university scholarships—particularly for students from socially vulnerable groups—as well as creating co-financing funds for stays abroad, would allow for broader participation and significantly reduce economic barriers, which is crucial for a large number of young people.

Equally important is the improvement of academic recognition of mobility. Universities should consistently apply the system of Learning Agreements and automatically recognize courses completed abroad, in line with the Bologna principles. This would encourage students to participate without fear of losing an academic year or facing complex academic procedures.

For sustainability, strategies for reintegration of students after their return need to be developed. The Ministry of Education and Science, together with the universities, should initiate programs that facilitate their inclusion in professional and academic life in RN Macedonia, through networking platforms, training, and priority access to research or professional positions.

Furthermore, virtual mobility should be promoted as an innovative form of internationalization, particularly relevant for students who cannot travel due to financial, health-related, or family reasons.

Finally, it is essential to establish a central system for monitoring and evaluating mobility. Such a system should enable the tracking of student numbers, profiles, and trajectories, as well as measuring the effects on their academic, professional, and social development. Through continuous analysis and adaptation of policies, long-term and sustainable effects of mobility can be achieved—not only for individuals, but also for society as a whole.

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