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What stops students from studying abroad?



Maarja Beerkens 27 May 2016 Issue No:415



As international linkages are more and more visible in everyday life and work, many countries have articulated an ambition to expose students more extensively to an international experience during their studies.

Evidence indeed indicates that spending a semester or a year abroad tends to increase inter-cultural understanding and sensitivity of students. It tends to lead to internationally oriented careers. Furthermore, students themselves are overwhelmingly positive about their experiences abroad, claiming personal growth and development through the experience.

European ministers of higher education have agreed on an ambitious target of 20% of all students having an international experience by the end of their studies. While participation in the Erasmus programme which facilitates exchange in Europe is steadily increasing, the target is still far above the reality in most countries.

Why students do or do not participate in study abroad is probably one of the most studied issues in the field. Commonly reported barriers include financial reasons, worries about delaying studies, discrepancies between academic calendars, poor language skills and family ties.

Barriers to study abroad

In our study we took a slightly different approach and wanted to identify the barriers that truly inhibit participation in the Erasmus programme.

Much of our knowledge about barriers comes from surveying Erasmus participants, which means that a barrier may be severe but not severe enough for not participating.

Secondly, we know that participation rates are significantly higher in some countries than in others. If a barrier is a true obstacle for participating in the programme, the barrier should be more prevalent in countries of low participation.

Our student survey among Erasmus participants and non-participants in seven countries showed a somewhat unexpected picture though.

We can indeed identify barriers that characterise non-participants: lack of interest, home ties (personal and work-related obligations), and to a lesser extent insufficient language skills. Other barriers financial barriers, delay to studies, administrative hurdles etc are reported equally or even more often by students who actually undertook the study abroad.

As we have argued elsewhere, this seems to refer to a step-wise decision-making process where certain barriers may not be discovered until the student has committed to going abroad and enters an application phase.

What is surprising in our data, though, is the fact that countries are surprisingly similar in what distinguishes participants from non-participants.

Personal and work-related obligations at home are an interesting example here. This is a known barrier and policy-makers and researchers have suggested a need for an alternative form of study

abroad, such as shorter term courses perhaps, to overcome it.

In our sample it is reported as a reason for not participating in a study abroad programme by more than 50% of students in all countries except the United Kingdom where it is 42%.

Interestingly, personal and work-related obligations have a strong correlation with each other, which eventually led to us looking at these two reasons as one composite factor. Such a strong correlation is not easy to explain.

One might suggest that, for example, in the case of mature students both personal and work-related obligations are simultaneously present. Our sample contains mostly young, regular students though. Is it perhaps not objective obligations that these students are referring to but more a mindset that ties them more closely to home?

Secondly, if home ties are indeed the major explanation for not participating, one would expect to see some systematic evidence as to why home ties are more prevalent in the countries of low participation.

Perhaps these countries have a higher percentage of mature students or a more collective culture? This case is very difficult to make, though. We see different participation rates in Sweden and Finland, in the UK and Spain, in Poland and Czech Republic.

Making study abroad the norm

This makes us question whether the barriers identified by students retrospectively indeed reflect their actual decision-making process.

Are students rationally calculating the costs and benefits of participating in the programme, as we researchers often assume? Perhaps students just do what is normal in a given context and then create a justification afterwards?

Some earlier sociological studies in the United States present similar insights. In their book, *Study Abroad in a New Global Century*, Mark Salisbury and colleagues compare the decision to study abroad with the decision to go to a university.

The first step is developing an intent to study abroad and the intent is very much dependent on expectations in the students environment linked to their peers and family members etc. It is not only, or predominantly, a rational calculation of costs and benefits.

Some other studies have produced intriguing evidence that whether a student studies abroad later during a course can be predicted in the first year of studies, based on their views of the world and their own culture.

What practical relevance does this conclusion have for promoting study abroad?

We may need a more critical examination before we decide to address a problem that students identify as a barrier. If students follow a logic of appropriateness, the most effective solution is to make studying abroad the norm, an appropriate thing to do during their studies.

The main responsibility here lies thus within universities at a curriculum level. Easier said than done, alas.

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