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University Students' Views on the Impact of Student Mobility on their Achievements and Future Prospects

Abstract: Determining the impact of student mobility on students' achievements is not a simple matter. Quite the contrary, it is a very complex issue and is related to a number of factors. This paper seeks to determine the effects of student mobility on Macedonian students, i.e. on their academic achievements and the development of their competencies as well as on boosting their future career prospects. The Republic of Macedonia has access to many programs related to student mobility. The common agreement among the members of the academic community is that mobility, unfortunately, is not used enough by Macedonian students. Research findings point out that there are many contributing facts that influence this situation: students' lack of interest; their fear of going abroad; insufficient knowledge of foreign languages; lack of information concerning the advantages of spending one semester abroad; etc. The results presented in this paper rest on a comparative study that focused on two small groups of students from 'St. Kliment Ohridski' University in Bitola: the former composed of students who have spent one semester at a foreign university and the control group that included students who have not been involved in such activities. The findings are quite significant and reveal that, unlike students who have never realised mobility, mobile students demonstrate that their entire approach to the learning process, career advancement and life in general changes considerably due to the value able experience they have gained in the process of experiencing student mobility.

Key words: student mobility, impact, achievements, ERASMUS+ and CEEPUS programs

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Introduction

The ability of the students to move from one institution to another known as ‘mobility of students’ has been an integral part of the education process for centuries. However, during the last two decades, student mobility during tertiary education has been gaining momentum. This is primarily due to the processes of globalisation and internationalisation in general, which in the field of higher education have been clearly reflected in the Bologna process. Also, this tendency of increased student mobility can be attributed to the pronounced process of creating a knowledge-based economy worldwide.

Studying abroad inevitably entails numerous benefits for all stakeholders involved in the process. The benefits can be analysed on two levels: 1) world level (horizontally): students, countries of origin, host country and the third countries (Knerr et. al, 2010); and 2) state level (vertically): the country of origin, universities and students. In any case, students are the central beneficiaries of this process. Determining the impact that student mobility has on students is not a simple matter. Even though at first glance it might be assumed that studying abroad helps students in expanding their knowledge and skills and boosts their labour market prospects, still, the matter is much more complex and there is more to it than that (Kuzmanovska Tasetovikj, 2017).

Following and measuring student mobility and its benefits are constantly in the focus of many researchers and world institutions (Statistical Annex Erasmus+, Annual Report, 2016; Educational Indicators in Focus, 2013; Eurobarometer Flash No 304, 2010). Very frequently, many of them draw similar conclusions, such as: despite the well-documented student mobility, still, precise data on the rate of participation of students in cross-border programs are missing; there is still space for improving the numbers of student mobility at the world level, and, especially, in the developing countries; etc.

The Republic of Macedonia is a developing country and is strongly encouraged to take part in these global processes. In the last ten years alone, the country has been continuously provided with access to many student mobility programs. Unfortunately, up to the present moment, it seems that Macedonian university

students are not sufficiently interested in exploiting the possibilities presented to them by the ERASMUS+ and CEEPUS programs in the form of student mobility. There are many contributing factors that influence this situation, but, to the best of our knowledge, they have been seriously underexplored.

Consequently, the focus of this research is placed on the factors that influence Macedonian students not to make use of student mobility programs sufficiently.

The results presented in this paper are derived from a survey conducted among students whose home institution is the Faculty of Information and Communication Technologies at 'St. Kliment Ohridski' University - Bitola, in the Republic of Macedonia. In fact, the paper offers a quantitative analysis of the findings obtained via two tailor-made questionnaires conducted among two categories of students: 1) students who have realised student mobility, and 2) students who have not realised student mobility.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the relevant theoretical background related to the issues addressed in the study at hand. Section 3 expounds the methodology used in the research process. Section 4 presents the results obtained from this study, and finally, Section 5 offers relevant conclusions as well as recommendations for further research.

Theoretical background

State-of-the-art of student mobility

Cross-border university-based education has been receiving growing attention since the end of the last century. As a result, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2013, p. 1) points out that 'the number of students enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship has increased more than threefold, from 1.3 million in 1990 to nearly 4.3 million in 2011, representing an average annual growth rate of almost 6%. This is a greater increase than the overall rise in tertiary enrolments globally'. According to OECD and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD)/The World Bank (2007, p. 21) 'in the near future, it is very likely that this trend will further intensify'. Similarly, a study cited in OECD and IBRD/The World Bank (2007, p. 21) – the Global Student Mobility 2025 – predicts that 'the demand for international education will increase from 1.8 million international students in 2000 to 7.2 million international students in 2025'.

This current trend of increase in student mobility has triggered some extremely salient concerns: 'international student mobility is changing the global higher education landscape; nations understand and evaluate student mobility differently; there is a lack of comparable data, and consequently, definitive statistical analyses of reported figures are challenging to produce' (Verbik and Lasanowski, 2007, p.8); 'no precise data exist regarding the rate of participation of students in cross-border programs' (OECD and IBRD/The World Bank, 2007, p.1); etc.

In the Republic of Macedonia, university students are presented with numerous opportunities for realising student mobility abroad. Namely, Macedonian students mainly realise student mobility in the country members of the European Union. The most popular and well-known European mobility study programs in Macedonia are Erasmus+ (short for European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) and CEEPUS (short for Central European Exchange Program for University Studies). In addition, there are many other American, Australian, Japanese and Chinese student mobility programs that Macedonian students also have at their disposal.

The general impression regarding the student mobility of Macedonian students is that only a small number of Macedonian students experience student mobility in the course of their university studies (Kuzmanovska Tasetovikj, 2017). This claim finds confirmation in the official data presented in reports published at the websites of Erasmus+ Program (Erasmus+ Annual Report, 2016, p. 32–33) and CEEPUS (<http://www.ceepus.info/default.aspx?CMSPage=86#nbb>, accessed on 10.02.2018) (Table 1). As presented in Table 1, the portion of realised outgoing student mobility on the part of Macedonian students does seem pretty insignificant if compared with the overall scope of realised student mobility in the academic year 2016/2017 in all countries included in the program. Still, one cannot uphold this claim with a high degree of certainty as the numbers presented in Table 1 do not depict the actual number of students who have experienced student mobility. They only refer to the number of months students have spent abroad.

Program	No. of months spent abroad by Macedonian students	Total No. of months spent abroad by students in all countries included in the program	No. of countries in the program
Erasmus+	209 months	303,880 months	33
CEEPUS	190 months	5,772 months	16

Table 1. Number of months of realised outgoing student mobility by Macedonian students in the academic year 2016/2017

The numbers presented in Table 1 refer to the number of months students have stayed at foreign universities, i.e. the total duration of student mobility of all students who have achieved student mobility within the two mobility programs mentioned above – Erasmus+ and CEEPUS, in the academic year 2016/2017. What makes the interpretation of the results presented in Table 1 more complex is the fact that the two abovementioned student mobility programs do not even grant the same number of months per mobility (e.g. Erasmus+ usually grants 5 months per mobility grant, whereas CEEPUS grants either 1 or 4 months per mobility). Furthermore, students have an option to prolong their mobility by obtaining a grant for an additional semester or month. This is the reason why the portion of students who have used student mobility cannot be presented in exact numbers.

Hence, it becomes clear that analysing, discussing and presenting data regarding student mobility programs requires, first and foremost, a clear and unambiguous definition of the term ‘student mobility’ itself. It is a well-known fact in theory the

usefulness of data is always connected with a clear definition of the object/issue subjected to analysis. According to OECD (2007, p.25), students can be ‘mobile’ in a number of ways: ‘they can obtain their degree entirely in another country; participate in an exchange study program abroad; undertake field work or an internship abroad; register for a semester/year in a foreign country via a mobility program, etc.’. In that respect, Table 2 provides a detailed framework of the different forms and conditions of mobility, which can be very useful in understanding the complex nature of cross-border education.

Category	Forms and conditions of mobility	Examples
	Month	
	Semester	
	Academic year abroad	– Exchange programs
Students	Full degrees	– Part of academic partnership for home degree or joint degree – Full study abroad for a foreign degree or qualification
	Internships	

Table 2. Framework of cross-border higher education activities

Source: Adapted from Knight (2005b)

The funding of student mobility is also another important factor that needs to be taken into consideration when discussing student mobility programs. Normally, this segment can be realised in the form of exchange agreements, government scholarships, public or private grants, and self-funding.

Bearing all these aspects related to student mobility in mind, for the purposes of this paper, we rely on several definitions proposed by the European Commission (2015, p.1), Erasmus+ and University of Glasgow (2016, p.1). Thus, student mobility here is seen as an opportunity for students to study abroad whilst undertaking their undergraduate or postgraduate studies at their home institution. This enables them to spend an integrated period of study, which can range from 3 months (one semester) up to 12 months (an entire academic year) at another higher education institution abroad; and they do this in exchange for ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) credits.

Benefits and obstacles related to student mobility

Apart from realising mobility for obtaining credits, which is the primary benefit that students obtain from realising student mobility abroad, according to the European Commission (2015, p.1) student mobility brings students numerous secondary benefits in terms of enhancing their educational, linguistic and cultural competence, as well as some tertiary benefits such as turning students into well-qualified, open-minded, internationally experienced young people and competent

future professionals (ibid). In this direction, 'Trends 2015: Learning and Teaching in European Universities' (Sursock, 2015, p.13) notes that internationalisation has a significant influence on the development and improvement of the learning process, i.e. 'the quality of learning . . . has improved thanks to student mobility'. Moreover, students' development during student mobility also entails the development of some special set of skills, which, according to OECD (2007, p.33), are recognised by employers when recruiting higher education graduates, and which are also listed in the Eurobarometer survey (2010, p.6). These are: an ability to work in a team, computer literacy, sector-specific skills, communication skills, an ability to adapt to new situations quickly and acquisition of analytical and problem-solving skills. According to Eurostudent VI (2018, p. 220), 'students' mobility experience is commonly assumed to boost graduates employability'.

Student mobility very frequently comes across various obstacles that, undoubtedly, contribute greatly to the current unfavourable situation regarding the extent to which student mobility is realised in general. In that respect, the University of Glasgow (2016, p.1) focused on students as beneficiaries and came up with a list of factors that limit student mobility: additional costs of living overseas and lack of financial support from the university or some other external sources; lack of foreign language skills; disruption associated with relocation; credit transfer and recognition within the 'home' university degree program; reluctance to leave their 'comfort zone' – this particularly goes for students who live with their parents during their studies; academic staff being reluctant to let their best students participate in student mobility because of the potentially negative impact on marks; etc.

The abovementioned benefits and obstacles served as a foundation for our research. We were particularly interested in the obstacles as we wanted to find out which of those factors influence the current situation with student mobility in Macedonia. Moreover, we wanted to check whether students in general recognise the actual benefits they can get from student mobility, irrespective of whether they have already experienced mobility or not.

Methodology

The research process at hand draws on a quantitative analysis of a survey conducted among undergraduate and postgraduate students. In fact, the results are obtained via a separate and a comparative (cross) analysis of two tailor-made questionnaires. The questionnaires are composed of questions related to students' awareness of the benefits they can have from student mobility as well as the reasons why they use or do not use the possibility for realising student mobility abroad.

The results presented in this paper are based on the responses provided by former and current students from the second oldest state university in Macedonia, 'St. Kliment Ohridski' University in Bitola (henceforward the University), more precisely students enrolled at the Faculty of Administration and Management

of Information Systems in Bitola (FAMIS) and the Faculty of Information and Communication Technologies in Bitola (FICT) in the period from 2008 to 2017¹ (henceforward the Faculty).

Fifty students out of 3,000 students in total in a 10-year period enrolled at the Faculty were included in the survey. The survey consisted of two different questionnaires intended for two different groups of students. The first questionnaire (henceforward Q1) relates to students who have spent one semester at one of the foreign universities in the Europe Union via Erasmus+ or CEEPUS student mobility programs. These students are also referred to as outgoing students. The second questionnaire (henceforward Q2) was intended for students who have not been involved in such activities. All students at the Faculty who have experienced student mobility were invited to participate in the research. On the other hand, the choice of the students who have not been involved in student mobility, the so-called 'twin students', was made very carefully – they needed to fulfil few conditions to be included in the survey: to be of the same gender and to belong to the same generation as the students who have used student mobility; as well as to have similar academic achievements at their home university as the outgoing students. Some of the interviewed students included are still studying, whereas the rest have already completed their studies and have graduated from university.

The survey was created and conducted online. Also, it was carried out in two consecutive phases. In the first phase, Q1 was sent to all 33 students from the Faculty that have been or still are outgoing students whose mobility meant/means spending a minimum one semester abroad, at a host institution in some of the EU countries, with which the Faculty has bilateral contracts within the framework of the two previously mentioned mobility programs (Erasmus+ and CEEPUS). In the second phase, each of those students was contacted again, and was asked to suggest and contact 'a twin' student from his/her generation who has had/has similar academic results at their home Faculty. The most important condition for the choice of the 'twin student' was that they have never been part of any student mobility program. In the first phase, 75% of all outgoing students from the Faculty (i.e. 25 students) filled in Q1. Consequently, in the second phase of the survey, the same number of 'twin students' (i.e. 25 students) were interviewed via Q2.

The length of each questionnaire was different as a result of the fact that some of the questions from Q1 were not applicable to the students who have not used mobility, and, consequently were not included in Q2. The questions in both Q1 and Q2 elicited several different types of answers: fill in the space provided; choose one of the options given; choose several of the given options; and for some questions a five-point Likert Scale was provided where 1 was the worst and 5 the best option offered.

¹ The results presented here were obtained from FAMIS in the period from 2008 to 2014, and, then, from FICT in the period from 2014 to 2017. This is so because, upon a 2014 Government decision, FAMIS was transformed into FICT.

Results of the research

The results presented here are obtained from the research whose scope and methodology was explained in the previous section. They are presented in a combined manner, namely apart from presenting the results obtained from each of the two questionnaires (Q1 and Q2) separately, also at points, whenever possible, we tried to compare and contrast the results gained from Q1 and Q2.

We shall begin the presentation of the results with a striking finding that overlaps completely in both Q1 and Q2. All interviewed students who filled in Q1 (henceforward Q1 students) stated that they are fully content because of the fact that they have made the decision to realise student mobility. Also, all students who filled in Q2 (henceforward Q2 students) stated that they would like to realise student mobility and that they would highly recommend student mobility to other students who have not done so just yet. Moreover, a high percentage of Q1 students further stated that they would like to practice student mobility again (88.5%) and that their expectations were completely met during their previous student mobility (80.8%). In fact, 73.1% of Q1 students assessed their mobility with the highest grade – 5.

The answers of Q1 students reveal that they do not favour one of the two possible mobility programs (Erasmus+ and CEEPUS) over the other; whereas Q2 students are much more familiar with the Erasmus+ program (94.7%) than with CEEPUS (42.1%).²

Q2 students locate the main reason for not having realised mobility in the lack of information (66.7%) as well as in the lack of trust as far as the selection process is concerned (33.4%), namely, they attribute their disinterest to the widely spread belief that the grants are normally reserved for somebody else beforehand.

As to how students normally obtain the information about student mobility programs, Q2 students listed the following sources of information: the Faculty's website and the contact person (26.3%); the University's website (23.1%); friends, i.e. fellow students from the Faculty (57.9%). Furthermore, what is worth noting in Q2 students' answers is that many of them (63.9%) said that they found the information about the student mobility programs quite unclear and unhelpful.

When it comes to the benefits that students gain from realising student mobility, the questionnaires touched upon several relevant issues. The most interesting results are the following:

- Of the Q1 students, 92.3% thought that mobility opened new perspectives in life; 73.5% of Q2 students said that one of the reasons why they would use a mobility opportunity in the future is because it might 'open new perspectives' for them.

² In this context it should be mentioned that the Erasmus+ mobility program is managed by the University, whereas the CEEPUS mobility program is managed by the Faculty. At the Faculty, there is one person responsible for sharing the information about both programs.

- Of the Q1 students, 78.3% stated that they have improved their studying outcomes after returning back to their home Faculty, and in the case of Q2 students, 73.4% expect to learn something new if they spend a specific period of time abroad.
- As to the language improvement, the results are divided: the majority of students (71.3%) did not find studying at a foreign university helpful as far as their English language skills are concerned. However, those students who studied in Germany, claimed that they improved their German language skills considerably (92.4%).
- Of the Q1 students, 73.1% confirmed that they developed awareness of other cultures and 92.3% stated that after the mobility they felt more open to new partnerships and friendships. Even Q2 students showed awareness of these benefits; they stated that one of the reasons why they would consider mobility is to make new friends (75%) and to learn something new about foreign cultures (50%).
- A very positive impulse was received from Q1 students in relation to employability and the skills necessary for the process of applying for a job. Of the Q1 students, 80.8% said that by going through the application process for mobility they learned how to create or improve their CVs; 30.8% of Q1 students also said that that was the first time for them to have written a motivation letter; 76.9% of Q1 students filled in an employment application for the first time (online) and 46.2% of them felt encouraged to apply again online (for different purposes, mostly for a job). By contrast, the results from Q2 point to the fact that only a few students of those who haven't realised student mobility have had an experience with filling in an online application (10.2%); some Q2 students have worked on their CVs (30.2%), and 92.5% have never written a motivation letter.
- As to building students' personality and character, 100% of Q1 students said that after their mobility they have felt significantly more confident and convinced that they could succeed in life, and that they would function better in any new environment if they went abroad again. Of the Q1 students, 80.8% expressed their enthusiasm that they could function better even in their own country after their mobility. Out of all these benefits, Q2 students believed that becoming independent is the most important benefit (25%). This is quite understandable if we take into account the fact that 90% of our students study in the same city where they have been born and raised. Q1 students, on the other hand, said they have become more independent in making decisions and more reliable after they had participated in a student mobility program (84.6%); 61.5% have improved their time and money management skills, and 65.4% stated that they act more proactively in life, in general.

The results from both questionnaires concerning the relation between a) student mobility and employability, and b) student mobility and the treatment

outgoing students receive from their professors at their home Faculty, called for special attention and directed us towards doing a comparative analysis. In both questionnaires, students stated that employers' recognition of student mobility boosts their employability prospects considerably. Namely, 46.2% of Q1 students thought that employers see mobility as a positive experience; whereas 89.9% of Q2 students believed that if they had realised mobility that would improve their chances of employment (Q2). Interestingly, only 37.5% of these Q2 students thought that employers consider student mobility as a clear advantage in the hiring process. The situation with the professors at the home Faculty is almost the same: both Q1 and Q2 students stated that they did not believe that student mobility could earn them greater appreciation on the part of their professors (85%).

Asked about the possible obstacles to embarking on a student mobility program, Q2 students listed the following: lack of financial support (43.2%); the need for prior foreign language preparations (5%); insecurities about credit recognition by the home Faculty (26.3%); lack of professors' support for using student mobility options (26.3%); fear of leaving home and their comfort zone (26.3%); the need for greater support while being abroad (21.7%); employers do not recognise mobility as an advantage in the hiring process (21.7%); and lastly, the lack of information about student mobility (35.6%).

Finally, we believe that if we want to draw a much more solid conclusion related to this issue, we need to do cross-sectional data analysis taking into account other relevant factors such as the general gender structure of the Faculty; the financial state of the student's family; etc. Nevertheless, these factors are not included here as they are not in the focus of this research.

In addition, we haven't analysed the results obtained herein relation to the Faculty the interviewed students came from, especially in the case of the mobile students. We also did not analyse students' different fields of study as they can be of a different length, for instance. Finally, we believe that these limitations do not influence the results significantly, and that is why they are deemed irrelevant here.

Conclusions and further research

In general, our findings confirm Souto-Otero et al.'s (2013, p.70) contention that participation in student mobility can be greatly increased by providing better dissemination of the information related to student mobility programs and the process of application itself, as well as by stressing the benefits of student mobility. In fact, the results that we have obtained also suggest that the increase in successfully completed student mobility is closely related to the level of informedness of students.

With that being said, the recommendation in that respect is that special attention should be paid to the process of disseminating information regarding student mobility. Initially, all students should receive general information regarding the opportunities they have for student mobility and the conditions they need to meet to be able to apply and complete a student mobility program. Additionally, the students who have shown interest in realising student mobility should be thoroughly

informed about the wide range of versatile benefits they are likely to gain from undertaking student mobility.

Another recommendation that can further enhance the informedness of students refers to the actual channels used for disseminating information. Namely, apart from using the conventional and traditional ways of informing students via the Faculty/University websites, and by establishing contact with the contact person for a particular student mobility program, it is necessary to organise events in which alumni will be invited to take part and to share their positive experiences with student mobility. In order to have a real impact on the level of informedness, this activity should be organised on a regular basis.

As to a possible future research related to this issue, it would be truly interesting to examine employers and professors' position regarding the achievements, skills and competences of their employees/students who have the status of student mobility alumni versus their employees/students who have never participated in a similar undertaking.

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POGLEDI ŠTUDENTOV NA UČINEK MOBILNOSTI ŠTUDENTOV NA NJIHOVE DOSEŽKE IN PRIHODNJE MOŽNOSTI

Povzetek: Ugotavljanje vpliva mobilnosti študentov na njihove dosežke ni preprosta stvar. Ravno nasprotno, je zelo kompleksno in povezano z različnimi dejavniki. Namen prispevka je opredeliti učinek mobilnosti na makedonske študente, tj. na njihove akademske dosežke in razvoj njihovih kompetenc ter njihove prihodnje poklicne možnosti. V Republiki Makedoniji je možen dostop do številnih programov, povezanih z mobilnostjo študentov. V akademski skupnosti je na žalost splošno mnenje, da makedonski študenti teh možnosti ne izkoristijo dovolj. Rezultati raziskave kažejo na naslednje dejavnike: pomanjkanje zanimanja med študenti; strah pred odhodom v tujino; nezadostno znanje tujih jezikov; pomanjkanje informacij o prednostih študijskih izmenjav in drugo. V prispevku so predstavljeni rezultati primerjalne študije, ki se osredotoča na dve manjši skupini študentov z Univerze St. Klimenta Ohridskega v Bitoli: v eni so bili nekdanji študenti, ki so bili med študijem tudi v tujini, in kontrolna skupina študentov, ki niso bili vključeni v mednarodne aktivnosti. Ugotovitve so precej pomembne, saj razkrivajo, da v nasprotju s študenti, ki študijsko nikoli niso bili v tujini, mobilni študenti dokazujejo, da se zaradi dragocenih izkušenj, pridobljenih v procesu uresničevanja študentske mobilnosti, precej spremeni njihov celotni pristop k učnemu procesu, napredovanju v karieri in življenju na splošno.

Ključne besede: mobilnost študentov, učinek, dosežki, spretnosti, Erasmus+ in program CEEPUS

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