Home and Away : Studying in Europe

Léonore MONCOND'HUY

Valérie Erlich's analysis of academic mobility across Europe identifies higher education as a vehicle for greater European integration and indirectly sheds light on the relations amongst European states and between Europe and the rest of the world.

Drawing from sociology, economics, psychology and geography, Valérie Erlich's overview of the existing research into the diverse forms of student mobility in Europe and the challenges facing international students is decidedly multidisciplinary in its approach. From the outset, however, she highlights the lack of reliable, cross-European data distinguishing clearly between mobile students and the rest of the student population.

The text addresses many questions, first and foremost in relation to the European Union and its making. Does higher education promote European integration, or could it be used to do so in the future? Indeed, since the emergence of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the clearly stated objectives of the EU and the reality on the ground for individual member states seem to have been increasingly at odds with one another. Is there a functioning Europe-wide policy on the internationalisation of higher education, or have the ever-growing global challenges which we face lead, on the contrary, to a greater divergence of policies from states, local authorities and institutions, which the issue of student mobility has further highlighted? Are individual strategies compatible with those proposed by the states? Such questions will be useful in framing our reading of the text.

A history of globalised higher education

The text is divided into three parts and opens with a history of the new terminology, - evaluation, quality assurance and student employability - to have emerged from within the debate on globalised higher education and the development of European policies on the issue. Institutionalised policies on academic mobility are now well established, particularly through programmes such as Erasmus, and contribute as much to improving international student mobility as they do to promoting comparability in the standards and quality of international education and training programmes across Europe. The fact that the Bachelor-Master-Doctorate system (*la réforme LMD* in French) already exists in most European states has been acknowledged early on in the Bologna Process. However, we seem to be facing a new challenge of how to balance the democratic principle of equal access to education and the need for a highly-skilled workforce with budget constraints[1] (p.50).

Mobility-promoting policies have strayed from the European humanist tradition, a point the author is keen to underline, and have lead to the commodification of education. Erlich describes

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[1] The author cites a study by Aghion and Cohen: *Éducation et croissance*, (Education and Growth), Paris, 2004.

what she believes has become a 'globalised market' in higher education, in which students' experiences and opportunities for development vary significantly depending on the specific barriers to mobility that they encounter. For many, 'study abroad is no longer primarily a cultural experience but instead represents an opportunity to obtain the skills considered useful for future employment' (p. 62).

Whilst it also seems that member states may have sacrificed some of their freedom in this area to supranational EU policies, the author's research reveals the significant degree to which national policies vary amongst each other, notably as a result of policies introduced by individual institutions which have to a large degree become increasingly autonomous. The shortcomings of programmes such as Erasmus can be seen from the way in which certain institutions have attempted to ignore the principle of fully reciprocal mobility, a principle which in practice is rarely upheld. There are two very distinct rationales behind hosting international students, which relate to differing perceptions of what the student may offer their host country; the first is part of a more humanistic approach in favour of promoting international development by hosting students from the global South and from other developing countries within a framework of knowledge sharing, while the second is more 'commercial' in outlook and primarily seeks to attract and retain foreign elites within the host country.

Composite data and inequalities in student mobility
The second part of the text focuses on statistics; Erlich identifies the separate factors relevant for research into student mobility and which might also help explain the inequalities facing international students.

The very definition of 'student mobility' is in itself problematic, which in turn leads to difficulty in obtaining reliable data that is truly comparable at an EU-wide level. Erlich applies a broad-based approach to her analysis to include many different factors, including country of origin, destination country, and most popular fields of study. The average rate of student mobility within the European Union remains low, however, at 2.2%, and the increasing numbers of international students observed since the 1990s simply reflect the general increase in numbers of students as a whole.

Erlich then moves on to the factors associated with inequalities in academic mobility, citing studies which seem to suggest a link between mobility and social background; students' 'mobility capital', in other words their capacity to be mobile and to migrate for study, is strongly influenced by various forms of social capital, notably the social networks they have access to, their '*habitus mobilitaire*'[mobility habitus] and their foreign language skills. Inequalities in mobility thus mirror wider social inequalities quite clearly, although societal factors alone do not explain them in full.

A more individualised, qualitative approach is thus also required, to take into account the very different paths and trajectories of each international student. The author returns to the notion of 'mobility capital'[2], which consists of four elements: family and personal history, their previous experiences of geographical mobility including foreign language proficiency, their experience of adaptation abroad, and personality traits (p. 125). Mobility capital is largely a combination of educational, cultural and social capital, although not exclusively so. From the multiple studies and occasionally divergent findings which she analysed, Erlich acknowledges the difficulty in providing any overarching conclusions. Certain trends did emerge, however, which she believes will 'allow for a general framework for analysis of student experiences to be developed in the future'[3].

The author ends by comparing the funding programmes available for student mobility,

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[2] Coined by E. Murphy-Lejeune.
[3] V. Erlich cites E. Murphy-Lejeune, p. 130.

which for the most part fail to uphold the principle of equal access to higher education enshrined in European law. There are many ways to bypass this principle, both at the local and at the national level, which in practice leads to glaring inequalities between students on the one hand and between the more prestigious universities and those struggling to attract students on the other.

Individual trajectories and European culture

In the final section, Erlich looks at the profiles of 'travelling students' and at the role of mobility in their personal, academic and professional lives. The challenges associated with academic mobility and thus the motivations of students to study abroad can differ radically according to social background and country of origin; for those from developing countries and the global South, student mobility often represents their sole means of continuing with higher education and obtaining internationally recognised qualifications, while those from the global North are more likely to view the experience simply as an 'extra bonus', an opportunity to discover new cultures and to learn a foreign language. Further comparisons can also me made, looking at how different groups of mobile students cope with cultural differences (p. 169) dependent on factors such as geographical origins and type of mobility, and not necessarily social background or country.

The author further points out the paradox of how little research there is on either the living conditions of mobile students or their attitudes and opinions regarding their studies abroad, despite what we know about the cost of studying abroad representing the largest obstacle to mobility. This aspect is often only discussed in satisfaction surveys, in spite of the fact that living and studying conditions are the main areas in which national education systems compete. The author also makes a final point that there is little conclusive evidence on the impact of mobility on future employability; few studies are able to show any clear long-term 'added value' for mobile students upon entering the labour market.

From whichever angle one approaches the subject, existing research shows the extent to which the opinions amongst international students with regards to their host country and even within groups of expatriates vary, which calls into question whether a shared European culture can ever emerge from this type of international exchange. Following their experiences abroad, students are far more likely to relate to a 'binational' identity than they are to a pan-European one. While the Erasmus experience can be likened to contemporary *Bildung*, as V. Cichelli points out (p. 162), the programme's explicitly European dimension is promoted rather indirectly through exposing students to another member state's culture or through assimilation into an independent, often rather insular, 'Erasmus culture'; there is no particularly strong sense of shared European culture and territory.

Erlich's study of international student mobility in higher education thus also indirectly sheds light on the relations amongst European states and between Europe and the rest of the world. While student mobility may be a sign of the growing internationalisation of higher education and of the convergence in international education and training programmes, it is also clear that significant differences persist and that the relations among states are far from being equal.

The issues she raises currently feature very much at the centre of political debate, including the question of future funding for student mobility, which follows in the wake of discussions around the new 'Erasmus for All' programme. Another issue touched upon in several chapters but which could no doubt form the subject of an entirely separate study, and which is currently being very hotly debated in France, is that of language. Comparisons of European institutions show, for example, that many European universities have already completely integrated English-medium instruction into certain courses (p. 50), in a bid to further attract students. Indeed, choice of teaching language is one of the main factors students consider when deciding on their destination.