THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY IN ROMANIA

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Abstract
International Student Mobility provides opportunities for acquisition, creation and transfer of knowledge. However, little is known about the students' impact on the settings they return to. This article examines the impact of Romanian international mobile students on the origin communities. The respondents indicate a positive experience during the mobility, with language and academic knowledge as the main accumulations. Significant differences are detected in terms of students' impact on the education system and on the working environment. The results emphasize the possible consequences and how the return environments may benefit from the students international experience.

Keywords: International Student Mobility, education system, migration impacts, Romania

Introduction

Return migration and its effects on the origin countries are covered extensively in the migration literature. Researches show how the returnees can foster economic development, enrich human capital, stop human capital outflows, transfer technology, knowledge, and, financial remittances (Faist and Fauser 2011, de Haas 2007); invest in their own or family members' education, lift the social status or challenge the power relations, create a 'culture of migration', hybrid identities or adopt diverse habits and values (Massey et al. 1993, Cassarino 2004, Black et al. 2003); be involved in politics, in the non-governmental sector or to do philanthropic activities (King 2000).

In the debate around return migrantion and its effects, scholars take into account manly the labor migrants who return and how they cand impact the origin countries. However, recent research asks for other categories of migrants to be included in this disscusion (King and Raghuram 2013). Working in this context, this paper empirically explores the effects of

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international students' return in the home countries. It focuses on the Romanian students mobile abroad, over 25.000(almost 3% of the total tertiary enrolment) in 2010. A gradual increase took place in the last decade with 2–3 percentages per year, a trend which may continue in the next years as well. Simply put, a few tens of thousands of students are coming back yearly from diverse countries.

This research explores key issues regarding the International Student Mobility, its role in accumulation, transfer of knowledge and basic information about the Romanian ISM and the Romanian Higher Education System. After that, drawing upon 18 in-depth interviews with former international students from Babeş-Bolyai University (UBB), academic and administrative staff from UBB and employers, it examines which are the changes fostered by the mobile students' in the return setting.

Romanian' International Student Mobility in context
In the last decades, the number of students involved in international mobility has increased. In 2010, the students population involved in the international migration was more than 3.7 million, an increase from less than one million in 1975 (Felbermayr and Reczkowski 2012). The notable increasing trend of international students' migration made scholars to label it as one of the most rapid growing migration flow in the world (King, Findlay and Ahrens 2010). Additionally, scholars argue this positive growth will be maintained for the next period of time (Choudaha and Chang 2012).

The international students' migration/mobility was firstly mentioned as part of the "brain drain" debate, just as another form for skilled individuals to leave the origin countries for more "developed" ones (Skeldon 1997). For this reason for a long time the evolution of the "brain drain" concept was representative for the ISM. The word "brain" indicates the existence of certain skills and competencies, while "drain" is suggesting a one-direction move of significant numbers of individuals (Giannoccolo 2010). The international students' migration emerged from the highly skilled migration and "brain drain" discussions when researchers introduced the higher education topic (King and Findlay 2010). Part of this new orientation, the ISM was considered a result of the interaction between these two phenomena rather than just another form of highly skilled migration (IOM 2008). As part of this view, ISM is no longer seen just as another category of highly skilled migration, such as professors and

academic staff, corporates, military personnel or International NGO members (Todisco, Brandi and Tattolo 2003).

Scholars relate ISM to three main motivations. A first one is the students' desire to improve their career prospects, for adventure, new language acquisitions, etc. The second one is given by the states and supra-state institutions acknowledge of the students' potential to contribute to innovation, economic competition and knowledge-based economy, job scarcities, cultural change, fostering local or regional identities, enhancing human capital, and so on. The third is related to the education system, such as worldwide recognition, to attract elite students, to adapt to the world market, for extra financing or simply for diversity (IOM 2008, Samers 2010).

The aforementioned literature mainly treats the international students as a class of "privileged" people with a wealthy family and social background. Recent work on ISM questions this reductionist view and calls for further research on the multiple identities international students simultaneously fit in (King and Raghuram 2013). As an example, the work of Raghuram (2013) is intending to extend the theoretical analyze of ISM from one which is mainly based on the "spatialities of migration" to one which should be grounded more on "spatialities of knowledge." In other words, this is a call to understand the acquisition of knowledge as the core of student mobility.

The internationalization of Higher Education Institutions in Romania is a new phenomenon, strongly related to the pro-EU orientation and the globalization of higher education (Salajean and Chiper 2013). The fall of Romanian Communist regime in 1989 made available the immigration option for an important number of Romanians. A few years afterwards, migration becomes a mass phenomenon in Romania, a country with limited migration experience before. The following period is understood as a "four wave" process from a migration perspective:(1) between 1990 and 1995 – characterized by long term, highly skilled migration in Western Europe, USA and Canada; (2) between 1996 and 2001 – temporary unqualified labor migration in Turkey, Israel, Hungary and Germany; (3) between 2001 and 2006 – temporary and circular migration of low skilled mainly in Spain and Italy; and (4) after 2007– labor migration of qualified and high qualified individuals in Western Europe (Ulrich et al. 2011, Militaru 2013).

The population access to higher education widened after the 1989 through all Central and East European countries (Baláz and Williams 2004). For instance, between 1998/99 and 2007/08 the number of students almost tripled in Romania, the most important growth of students' population in Europe. Significant increases were reported in other CEE countries as well, but not at the same extent as in the Romanian case. Furthermore, the 127% increase of the Romanian students' population took place in a period of young population decline (Teichler, Ferencz and Wächter 2011). A number of new private universities appeared to satisfy the increasing population demand and the public universities started to diversify the specializations provided (Roman 2008). This situation reflects the labor market restructuration taking place in the CEE countries (Klazar, Sedmihradsk and Van Urová 2001).

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics calculated more than 25.300 Romanian students abroad in 2010, almost 3 % of total tertiary enrolment in Romania (UNESCO 2010). In 2004, the number of the Romanian students abroad stood at 23.000, while in 2006/07 there were 24.597 (Teichler, Ferencz and Wächter 2011). Further, the number of Romanian students involved in international mobility is expected to increase in the next years (ICEF 2012). The number of international mobile students coming to Romania was 13.459 in 2010. More than 4.500 come from the Republic of Moldova and 1.200 from Tunisia. Between 500 and 1.000 are from Israel, Greece and Italy (UNESCO 2010). Therefore, Romania was labeled as a sending country due to the difference between the outbound and inbound international students (Roman and Suciu 2007).As one of the major universities in Romania, Babeș-Bolyai University was ranked in 2010 as second in terms of the number of students involved in international mobility. That means 8.21 % of all Romanian international students' abroad same year (ANOSR 2011).

International Student Mobility and their impacts in origin countries
The role played by migrants in developing sending countries recently gained prominence in academia and policy debates. Scholars acknowledged that returnees possess a number of tools which can have significant impacts on developing sending countries (Black et al. 2003). The first of these tools is financial remittances. Money and goods accumulated by migrants or sent back to their origin countries play a crucial role in the migrant-sending communities and households (Gallo 2013). This is a well-documented fact in the literature, especially due to the increasing flows of remittances worldwide in the past few decades and due to their growing importance for many countries. But money is not the only resource which

migrants transfer; new practices, ideas and social capital – commonly regarded as 'social remittances' – are also transferred and used by migrants in the home communities (Faist 2008; Levitt 1998). In the context of modern communication capabilities and ease of travel around the world, this topic raises important new questions for scholars (Portes 2001). Migrants also create transnational social spaces between origin, transit and host communities and individuals (Faist 2006). These transnational social spaces are defined as "sustained ties of persons, networks and organizations across the borders of multiple nation-states, ranging from weakly to strongly institutionalized forms" (Faist 1999). The use of social and financial remittances is believed to promote the development of transnational social spaces but may also have previously unrecognized impacts on origin communities through tourism, transportation, telecommunication and "nostalgic trade" (Orozco 2005).

Return migration and its effects on the origin countries are covered extensively in the migration literature. Researches show how the returnees can foster economic development, enrich human capital, stop human capital outflows, transfer technology, knowledge, and, financial remittances (Faist and Fauser 2011, de Haas 2007); invest in their own or family members' education, lift the social status or challenge the power relations, create a "culture of migration", hybrid identities or adopt diverse habits and values (Massey et al. 1993, Cassarino 2004, Black et al. 2003); be involved in politics, in the non-governmental sector or to do philanthropic activities (King 2000).

In the debate around return migrantion and its effects, scholars take into account manly the labor migrants who return. However, recent research asks for other categories of migrants to be included in this disscusion (King and Raghuram 2013). Being one of the most rapid growing migration flows in the world, International Students Mobility raised as a key component for knowledge acquisition, creation and transfer due to a number of reasons (Raghuram 2013). The increasing emphasis on the important role played by knowledge and information in modern societies and developed countries dependency on knowledge in order to assure competiveness is one of them (OECD 1996, Williams 2006). In this respect, countries make making significant efforts to become or remain a "knowledge based economy" by enhancing the human capital (Pohjola 2000, Kefela 2010). However, there are two major areas which can generate advancement: investments in the autochthonous education system and international mobility (OECD 1996).

Considering the lack of resources available in the so called "less developed" countries, the second one gained significant momentum (IOM 2008). This is because migrants can acquire different types of knowledge and consequently, migrants who return have the potential to transfer the knowledge accumulated abroad (Williams 2006). ISM is the only form of mobility which is designed for the specific purpose of knowledge acquisition abroad (Baláz and Williams 2004). Students are mobile for short periods of time with the specific purpose of improving or acquiring new skills, ideas and knowledge (Gribble 2008).

Scholars define four forms of skills, ideas and knowledge which can be accumulated during mobility: "embrained knowledge" – theoretical information which can be learned during the lectures or readings; "embodied knowledge" – "learning by doing" type of information accumulated through observation or participation; "encultured knowledge" – information about the social "accepted" understandings gained through socialization; and "embedded knowledge"– information about contextual factors which can be assimilated from organizational cultures (Blackler 2002, Williams and Baláž 2008). These four kinds of knowledge include a broad range of skills, ideas and knowledge.

The transfer of knowledge via mobility is mediated though a wide range of factors, such as the reintegration process or the propensity of sending society to use the accumulated knowledge (Williams 2006). Multi-level regulations, institutions and practices may influence the way, quantity, quality and importance of the transferred knowledge (Williams and Baláž 2008). However, this increasing interest paid for knowledge transfer in the ISM context has not been extended to the changes which may occur in the context of return due to students' mobility. There is a small number of researchers working with the impacts and added value of former international mobile students. New ideas, behavior changes, broader development of local economies and societies or the positive influence on employment are mentioned (Teichler, Ferencz and Wächter 2011). But the researchers' perspective on this issue is rather based on anecdotal examples, or it is based on limited areas (Salajean and Chiper 2013). In this way, the changes which can be induced by the students after coming back are relatively neglected in the literature even though the students' acquisition, transfer, and use of knowledge in the international mobility context is expected to produce significant impacts in the return societies (Kritz 2012).

Research design

In-depth interviews were carried out mainly with Romanian students between April and June 2013. All the respondents were enrolled at Babeș-Bolyai University. The number of male and female is relatively equal. The study includes students travelling with diverse forms of international mobility (e.g Erasmus) in different countries in Europe and North America. In order to understand the students' impact in the home societies after return, I conducted 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews. The number of former international students in this sample is 12 (10 interviews recorded and 2 not recorded), plus 2 interviews with employers,2with administrative staff members and 2 with academic staff members from UBB. I chose the individual in-depth interview as the main research tool because it eases the access to respondents' attitudes and values and provides a deep and complex view on the researched topic (Silverman 1993). These features were of particular interest for this study. First, the research on ISM in Romania is relatively and it requires a nuanced view. Second, a more in-depth observation is necessary in order to understand how and if skills, ideas and knowledge are accumulated, used and transferred during international student mobility.

Table 1.Socio-demographic characteristics of international students in the study

Characteristics	Number of
Gender	Female (7); Male (5)
Type of mobility	Erasmus(8); Non Erasmus (4)
Scholarship	Yes (9);No(3)
Previous mobility experience	Yes (4);No(8)
Work experience	Before mobility (6); After (8)
Year of mobility	2012 (5); 2011 (4); 2010 (3);
Duration	6 months or less (9); more than 6 months (3)
Country	USA (1); Slovenia (1); Canada (1); Germany (1); Spain (2); France (2); Italy (2); Hungary (1); UK (1)

Source: authors' data

Info: socio-demographic data of the 12 former international students who have been interviewed

One way of accessing the field was to contact the faculty administration to provide some cases of international students. This step provides me a list of

students who were mainly involved in Erasmus mobility. After, I used a snow-ball method to reach other students formerly involved in student mobility. The interviews, 45–60 minutes long, were mostly conducted face-to-face. In two cases, the registration of the conversations was refused and a combination between notes during the interview, exchange of e-mails and short conversations on Skype constituted the method to gather the data.

Interviews with informants cover a broad range of topics. With the former mobile students I discussed about the education and work background, other migration experience, motivations in choosing the destination for mobility, experiences after return, accumulation of skills, ideas and practices, transfer and use of knowledge in the return setting. Finally, we discussed about the impacts of the students' accumulated knowledge and presence in the setting they return. With employers, the administrative and the academic staff I asked whether their experience with international mobile students, the accumulation, transfer and use of knowledge and the impacts of the students' accumulated knowledge and presence in the setting students return.

Findings

As it is argued in different studies, one of the main reasons of student mobility is to enhance human capital abroad (Baláz and Williams 2004). In this research, this goal was recurrently reflected in the respondent answers during the interviews. Students mentioned a wide range of knowledge accumulated abroad. It seems that the most common form of accumulation is academic knowledge. There is a combination between acquiring new knowledge and improving the existent one. The language is representative in this case: the decision to be involved in international mobility is related to the pre-existence of some foreign language skills, usually English. During mobility, students improve the existent language and acquire a new one. For the international students the accumulated knowledge about the hosting country culture is also important. There is an interesting discussion about the differences between host and home countries where they highlight usually the Romanian lacunas in different fields, from the education system to daily behavior. Furthermore, this kind of knowledge is used in order to mention the channel through which knowledge was accumulated during mobility. For instance, Tamara was in the US for one semester with a scholarship from a US University:

> "I did acquire skills, knowledge and information when I was in the
> US. The main channel was a formal one, through class

> participation, meetings with my mentor and working in a Research Center. These are theoretical and practical information regarding my domain of expertise. I improved my English and I started to learn Spanish from another international student […]In more general terms, I learned that I have to 'live the moment', to enjoy the life and to smile more often, as the Americans do."

Even so, the learning process was mediated through a number of aspects. For instance, it is interesting that all students assumed that they are the only ones who have to learn when being in mobility. They mention only sporadically the idea of co-learning or sharing their knowledge, skills and ideas with other colleagues. Excepting some given examples about the Romanian case during the classes, there is a lack of two-way flow of information. A second aspect is that some of the respondents did not interact very much with the local society. The daily interactions have taken place in the international students circle and the interactions with the autochthon students or locals were limited. In addition, they report rich interactions with the Romanian group. These interactions were related to extra-curricular activities and the social life and not to formal education. Thirdly, other respondents experience the opposite situation in terms of social relations, but with consequences in the field of academic education. As in the case of Veronica, who studied in France, it was clear that the best part of mobility in France was the social one:

> "It was great. I really enjoyed people more than the education in France. By people I mean all of them, students or not. There were no serious differences in terms of teaching methods, contents or requirements between Romania and France or I was not able to detect them. But in terms of people' interactions, it was different. I was almost weekly in all kind of trips in the region, in the country and outside. I participate in the University projected called 'Meet Your Family'. That is, an 'adoptive' French family which introduced me in the French society, from church to bureaucratic. I can say that it was great."

The transfer of absorbed knowledge, skills and ideas do not necessary take place automatically after the return phase. There are a number of mediators for it. For instance, an important role seemed to be played by the reintegration process. Reintegration enables a more rapid and effectively transfers of knowledge in the home society. But reintegration seems to be strongly connected to the length of stay abroad, the overall experience of mobility and the preserved connections with the home country. Another

mediator is the return environment. An important idea that appeared is that of significant distinctions between the two main spheres in which accumulated knowledge can be transferred: the education system and the working place. A number of the returned students mentioned that the knowledge, skills and ideas absorbed abroad are essential at the working place; the other part observed that the University or the Faculty do not capitalize their knowledge. As the former student Simona (one year mobility in Spain) explained:

> "I transferred less knowledge from my experience abroad than I wanted. There is no such thing as capitalization of international experience back in the Faculty. It is not intended to be a continuity of that process of human capital enhancement by offering opportunities to transfer knowledge or practices absorbed during mobility. The only level in which I did relocate knowledge is in my own projects in both curricular and extracurricular activities. […] The best example is the working place where I use both the contacts and the knowledge established abroad".

Furthermore, questioning the implications of mobility experience in the return setting, the distinctions between those two spheres become even more obvious. In the case of the education system, students do not encounter explicit barriers but rather a lack of opportunities to transfer, disseminate or generate knowledge. There is no such thing as express formal or informal rules which can block the use of knowledge while back in the education system. There is a general lack of regulations and, except the ECTS transfer rules, everything is left to the student's will and initiative. Thus, the mobility experience implications are rather minimal in the analyzed setting. Except for some specific student interventions during the lectures, there are no other mobility implications for the education system. As an eloquent case of the aforementioned situation, Ana explains:

> "I do not say there are barriers, but what I say is that there are no opportunities for the transfer of ideas and information gained in the education system. It all depends on the individual initiative and will. It would be a good idea to have a [formal] program for knowledge transfer from those who have international experience to others and motivate everyone to access such opportunities. Otherwise, the skills and ideas accumulated abroad by me are essential at the working place. Everything, from the new knowledge to the skills to work with certain software I use here."

The above stated idea is also reinforced in interviews with the academic and administrative staff at UBB. They also observe how the impacts of the returned international students are minimal in the education programs. The answers tend to indicate two reasons for that. The first one is a question of attitude, of how the staff and the colleagues are welcoming the international students at the end on the mobility. The second one highlights the lacuna of the mobility programs which do not specifically work to help students to transfer the knowledge and to make changes in their communities. As one informant (part of the administrative staff) says:

> "First, nobody at the university level sees the international students coming back as factors of change. That is a serious problem – they go outside to become better educated. Second, it was a mistake in building some mobility projects. The programs help students to go abroad, but they not help them to use the knowledge after return."

In the case of the working place, the transfer and use of absorbed knowledge is encouraged and even mandatory in some cases, as it turns out from the interviews with the employers. There are diverse 'formal or informal' tools for former international students to use the absorbed knowledge. One example of the 'formal' context is given by Petra, who works in a research institute in Romania. Her employer explained that the mobility experience was the main reason to hire her. This is because she came up with the idea to apply for funding together with another research institute form the host University, a project which was financed. As part of this project, she uses in an institutionalized setting the knowledge and contacts accumulated during the mobility. As an example for the "informal" way, Andrei actually works in a company where the language skills accumulated and improved during the mobility are used on daily bases. Overall, the most used knowledge in the working places is related to the theoretical models, software skills, languages and the external connections.

Furthermore, in a few cases the knowledge transferred in the working place was used at the organization level. This is the case of Maria and her experience in Canada. The practical skills learned there in respect to the organization management were desired and used in order to increase the 'management quality' and to expand the organization members participation in the decision making process. Asking her employer, she explained that idea was a real success. In contrast with the cases of the

former international students who are still studying, those respondents who are working seem to use to a larger extent the knowledge accumulated during the mobility and in this way to have greater impact.

Conclusions

The international mobile students' perspective about their mobility experience is positive in general terms. This finding is in line with a number of studies dealing with ISM in CEE countries. There was no difference between the participants in Erasmus and non-Erasmus programs in terms of the quality and outcomes of the mobility for students. A high proportion of respondents disseminated or wants to disseminate their experience to other students in order to encourage the participation in these kinds of programs. They tend to indicate the knowledge acquisition as the main reason to study abroad. This is a rather unexpected outcome since in other studies the authors observe how students relate the ISM with other kinds of purposes, such as adventure or increasing job opportunities. The most important knowledge acquired during mobility by students is related to the language skills and academic knowledge.

The channels to absorb new knowledge abroad are in all cases double-sided. The education programs are not the only forms for human capital enhancement. Students also tend to be involved in extra-curricular activities and they socialize with other international students, local students and locals. The kinds of knowledge they mention as being acquired abroad are also broad and it seems to fit the four categories aforementioned. But the process of acquisition is mediated by a range of factors. For instance, all students assumed that they were abroad to learn and not to co-learn or to share knowledge with their colleagues. In some cases, the interactions were limited to the international students circle or to the Romanian one, with the observation that the language can be an important factor.

Overall, the mobility is considered a form of investments for the students' own development. First, this is not an expected result as far as the back-home education programs fail to capitalize the students' accumulated knowledge. Second, the respondents consider that the international experience helped them to accumulate different forms of knowledge which were essential to their own development and which were translated in the end in job opportunities. In terms of transferring the acquired knowledge, the appropriate environment is the main issue for international students. The working place – education system differences constantly appeared

during the interviews. While international experience seems to be essential for all students who work, the situation seems to be opposite for students' who are still studying. Despite a high appreciation of the mobility outcomes, there is an overall disillusion regarding the lack of possibilities for knowledge transfer and students' impact at the end of mobility among students from the second category. These results are contradicting other studies on Romanian ISM, where students are not convinced about the positive role they can play in the return communities.[2]

In this context, two questions emerge. First, what are the implications of these findings? Second, what may be the consequences of the different impact of students on universities and the working place? As a representative example for both questions, almost all respondents consider the idea to migrate for studies or work in the near future. Especially alongside those respondents who are still students, this thought seems to be associated with the low impact of their international experience in the education programs. For those who work, it is more related to the search for better opportunities abroad, such as better payment, working and living conditions. In any case, this is a trend which may have significant negative consequences on the Romanian society on long term.

Bigger issues are at stake here as well. First, this paper may have implications to understand why the migration intention among youths and students is high in Romania.[3] Study or work in environments which fail to help the former returned students to impact and change the communities may be one reason for this attitude. Second, the paper can provide significant insights on how both education system and the employers may benefit from the students' international mobility experience. Third, the informants' ideas may help the return environments to capitalize the students' international experience. For instance, it turns out in the end that there is a lack of "basic" use of the international students' knowledge in the education system.

This paper also contributes in several ways to the existing literature on international student mobility. First, it deepens the understanding of how returned students' from international mobility may impact their communities. Second, this is one of the first empirical attempts to work with all kinds of international mobility in the broader discussion on former

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[2] See for instance the work of Salajean and Chiper 2013

[3] For instance, according to 2013 "Graduate Barometer Romanian Total Edition Report".

international mobile students' impact after return. It uses data from Erasmus and non-Erasmus mobility programs. Third, it compares the two main environments students may return to – the education system and the working place. Comparing the diverse effects of students on these two settings is, to my knowledge, a gap in the literature. Fourth and finally, it covers the gap of the Romanian case. Despite of the few tens of thousands of students going and coming back annually from international mobility, there is very little knowledge about the impacts on the Romanian society of these practices.

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