

EXPLORING INWARD ERASMUS STUDENT MOBILITY IN UKRAINE A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

In the context of increasing interest in the internationalisation of education, the Erasmus programme of student mobility led by the European Commission is perceived as a highly desirable by many stakeholders. Despite the high demand emanating from Ukrainian students for Erasmus programme participation, the inward student mobility of EU nationals to Ukraine remains exceptionally low at the undergraduate level. The main aim of the current study is to explore the inward Erasmus student mobility mechanism in Ukraine through application of the single case study approach. The data were collected through participant observation, two rounds of interviews and the analysis of the participant diary. The research outcomes shed light on how the inward Erasmus student mobility programme in Ukraine can be arranged more effectively. We identified four broad areas by means of thematic analysis, which includes transparency of the process; communication; living conditions; learning process and facilities.

Keywords: Student mobility, Erasmus programme, Higher education, Case study, Ukraine

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INTRODUCTION

Mainly as a result of intense competition in higher education sector globally, a growing interest exists though in contributing to the developments of higher education through the mobility of students. To study in another country for European students is a common practice and evidence are provided that the international student mobility has increased considerably over time (Teichler, 2004) predominantly due to the existence of various supporting programmes such as Erasmus mobility programme.

Through the Erasmus programme the system of recognition of qualifications, gained by the students abroad, was introduced at supranational level contributing to the development of the 'Europe of knowledge' and enabling students to move freely between European countries. The

recent elaboration of the Erasmus programme enabled students as well as university partners from outside the European Union (EU), including Ukraine, to participate in the programme. Despite the high demand emanating from Ukrainian students for Erasmus programme participation and to go abroad for a certain duration of their studies, the inward student mobility of EU nationals to Ukraine remains exceptionally low at the undergraduate level. This situation has generated the research interest and the main purpose of the current study which explores the experience of one Erasmus student from the EU taking part in the programme. Initially the authors developed a research question of an intrinsic value: 'What can be learnt from the experience of a student involved in Erasmus mobility programme?' Once the

researchers entered the field of study and conducted the participant observation for six month period at a Ukrainian university, the need for instrumental view became more evident and the central research question was changed to 'How can the inward Erasmus student mobility programme in Ukraine be arranged more effectively?' Further exploration of the studied phenomenon necessitated the researchers to employ interview data collection technique and the documentation (diary) analysis.

The implementation of the single case study provided a unique opportunity to get an insight into the complexity of the inward student mobility process in modern Ukraine and to look at the studied issues from the stance of the student participant with the reflection on the utilisation of the single case study approach.

STUDENT MOBILITY

The researchers have extensively described the rationale for the involvement of higher education institutions in the international activities, which is often influenced by a variety of external environment pressures (Schofer & Meyer, 2005; Altbach & Knight, 2007). The internationalisation activities in higher education include student and staff mobility, institutional cooperation and co-optation, standardisation of the curricula and adoption of the best research practices. In the various research studies conducted into higher education and its internationalisation, a great deal of attention was paid to student mobility (Rivza & Teichler, 2007; West & Barham, 2009; Guruz, 2011). However, the controversy still exists in the views of the scholars as the appeals are made to the 'brain drain' phenomenon or commercialisation of education as well as risk for diminishing the quality of higher education (Rivza & Teichler, 2007), nonetheless, the expectations from the student mobility posed by the European Union show a wide array of advantages exceeding its drawbacks. Also student mobility can be considered as a specific form of migration, however in contrast to labour migration, for instance, the former is not driven by economic motives, but rather encourage students to gain experience: educational, travel, cultural and leisure (Di Pietro & Page, 2008; Van Mol, 2013).

For the purpose of this study it is of great importance to highlight the co-existence of two main categories of mobility: students enrolling in

a full degree in a foreign country and those seeking to study abroad for a certain period of time through a specific programme or bi- multi-lateral agreements. Recent studies demonstrate that the major steps were made by the agencies at both university and country level in recognition of the academic qualifications across borders and student mobility in general, despite the divergence in the perception of the importance of mobility initiatives. For instance, Germany is strongly promoting the outward mobility, facilitating recognition of curricula and continuing to provide funding for their students while abroad (West & Barham, 2009). In contrast, the United Kingdom and France allocate their efforts on inward student mobility, with the possibility of obtaining financial support by the students outside the European Union. As was assumed by the scholars, this was due to intention of these two educational systems to focus on wider global market for students as well as the overall promotion of economic, political and cultural features of these countries. A prominent example of the initiatives to support both inward and outward student mobility programmes with a number of financial support schemes in place is demonstrated by Sweden, whereas Turkey for instance is seen primarily a sending country (Kondakci, 2011).

At supranational level one of the most popular mobility programmes is Erasmus programme, which was introduced in 1987 aiming to facilitate student and staff mobility within Europe. Being part of the broader European educational policy, the programme had to fulfil its functions and contribute to the development of 'Europe of knowledge' coexisting with the concepts of life-long learning, access to education of a wider population and attainment of the qualifications, which are recognised across Europe (Rivza & Teichler, 2007; Gonzalez, Mesanza, & Mariel, 2011; Mitchell, 2012).

Through this programme, a package of supporting benefits is made available for those wishing to participate in the programme, enabling them to be entitled for scholarships which cover travel and daily costs, and weaving the tuition fees in the hosting University. In the selection of the prospective candidates the home institution conducts the selection process based on the applicants' academic achievements, foreign language skills and the commitment of the students to participate. The choice whether to participate in the student mobility programme

is determined by a number of factors, among which Rivza and Teichler (2007) distinguished students' ability to get access to academic provisions that are of a higher standards than domestic education institutions can provide. Thus, academically and economically, the *vertical* mobility, occurs between developing countries (or countries in transition) and their more advanced counterparts, whereas the *horizontal* one provides the opportunity to experience the differences between academic environments and to engage in various cultures. Also the students also benefit from the learning foreign language and overall exciting extracurricular life during the period of the mobility.

The initiative to create European Higher Education Area renders support to student mobility within the broader Bologna framework aiming to increase the number of non-European students as well as to encourage the mobility inside the EU. Student mobility evolved simultaneously with the development of international activities of universities, and states as a whole, introducing various cross-border educational activities such as articulated programmes of study, conferences and exchange. This reflects the new ERASMUS+ programme initiated in 2013 by the European Commission (2013b), which combines previous programmes including the Lifelong Learning Programme, Youth in Action, Jean Monnet, Tempus and Erasmus Mundus.

The recent elaboration of the Erasmus programme enabled students outside of the European Union to participate in the mobility programme. The student mobility is also seen as an extra tool for the transformation of the system of higher education in the Eastern Europe with a view to adapt to the Western institutions. As pointed out there is an evident lack of interest of the students from the Western Europe in studying in the Eastern Europe (Rivza & Teichler, 2007). At the same time students from the Eastern Europe also experienced many difficulties with respect to delays in approval process as well as provision of financial support as stipulated in the programme. The barriers to students mobility were studied extensively by a number of researchers in the field and the emphasis was made on insufficient foreign language proficiency, financial support and non-recognition of the curriculum standards (West & Barham, 2009). Among the priorities of choice are English-speaking countries, large countries

and big cities (Teichler, 2004).

The Ukrainian national context is of a great academic interest because of the existence of the rich palette of the transformations, which are required as a result of the European academic integration aspirations (Shaw, Chapman, & Rumyantseva, 2012). The resistance to change as well as the associated challenges from the institutional change perspective and organisational culture (Schein, 2010) at all levels in Ukrainian higher education system presents a challenge for the process of legitimisation of the higher education system internationally, thus assuring the quality of teaching.

The system of higher education in Ukraine undergoes a transition from Soviet state highly centralised system to an integrated European system (Shaw, *et al.*, 2012). The Governmental effort to harmonise the system of education with the European counterpart started with the joining the Bologna process in 2005. Since then a number of initiatives have been implemented into practice aimed to cultivate the Humboldtian traditions (Locke, Cummings, & Fisher, 2011; Enders, De Boer, & Weyer, 2013) of enhancing the quality of teaching and research in the environment of high autonomy of the universities. By encouraging the freedom of teaching and learning, both the state and universities are aimed at securing the material conditions and institution independence.

The enrolment of the students in Ukraine increased almost two times over the period of 2000 – 2009 (Shaw, *et al.*, 2012). The internationalisation of the system requires from the later not only the adoption of the best practices, but also increasing the opportunity for student mobility through full participation in various mobility programmes. Here the recognition of qualifications is the fundamental element of European higher education (West & Barham, 2009). Despite significant promotion activity and availability of funding, one of the universities in Ukraine, participating in the ERASMUS programme has experienced tremendous difficulty in attracting students from the Western European countries. Further exploration of the data on student mobility extracted from a recent report of the European Commission (2013a) shown that the mobility of European nationals to Ukraine remained exceptionally low at undergraduate level (Table 1). The number of Erasmus awards that could be potentially provided is significantly higher than

the number of students wishing to take part in the mobility programme in Ukraine.

Table 1: The number of European Erasmus students in Ukraine

Year	Number of students
2007	6
2008	5
2009	1
2010	10

Source: European Commission (2013)

Therefore, the research interests of the authors of this paper centre on the phenomenon of inward Erasmus student mobility in Ukraine, which remained under researched. The main research question has gone through the process of multiple alterations and has been formulated as 'How can the inward Erasmus student mobility programme in Ukraine be arranged more effectively?'

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore the inward Erasmus student mobility mechanism in Ukraine through the application of single case study approach. The authors believe that the highlight of real-life student experience can provide an epistemological advantage over other methodologies and improve the understanding of the phenomenon. From the ontological position the researchers consider the elements of social constructions as essential and embedded components, thus, despite the elements of the fallibilism, the construction of the knowledge plays important role in overarching interpretivist research paradigm in this study assigning the central role of collecting, interpreting and analysing the data to the researchers.

Following Gillham (2000), Creswell (2007) and Mitchell (2000), who argued that a case study can be a person, the researchers have selected a student undertaking a one-year Erasmus mobility programme at the Ukrainian university. The uniqueness of the case determined the methodological choice (Creswell, 2007; Simons, 2009). Thus, for academic year 2013-2014 this

was the only one European student wishing to take part in the mobility programme for two semesters at the university. Another postgraduate student wishing to participate in the programme of studying at this host University in Ukraine has withdrawn from it at an early stage.

Although the authors believe that introduction of other cases (Erasmus students) to this research may broaden the outcomes, a single case study would not create any instability or inconsistency in the findings. Moreover, because the context is unique the researchers are driven by the willingness to capture the phenomenon in a real-time. Also the researchers would like to reflect on the inability of the ERASMUS office in Ukraine to provide an up to date data on the number of bachelor full-time students involved in the mobility programme referring to the confidentiality issues. Thus, the element of 'convenience' has been present in the case selection, emphasising the need to explore what is accessible (Yin, 2009).

For data collection purposes the researchers used participant observation, interview and document (diary) analysis methods (Gillham, 2000; Creswell, 2007), which formed a set of evidence from multiple sources (Figure 1).

The participant observation was applied at the initial stage of this research as one of the authors of this paper was extensively involved in the coordination process of the Erasmus mobility programme at Ukrainian university. Thus the interest expressed by one European student to study in Ukraine was considered as conspicuous case because of the overall small number of the European students participating in the inward mobility in Ukraine.

The key element of a participant observation is direct involvement of the researchers in the studied phenomenon, thus broaden the participants retrospections. The unobtrusive nature of the participant observation in this study enabled to explore the fledgling involvement of the Ukrainian university in Erasmus programme of student mobility. The intrinsic nature of this case at the initial stage of the research enabled the researchers to conduct the data collection without the instrumental purpose of the study being formed. Further the instrumental purpose of the case study became evident, thus the student participant was able to provide an insight from the 'outlier' (Thomas, 2011) through interviews. Thus, two series of in-

depth interviews (Stake, 2005; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; King & Horrocks, 2010) were

conducted with the student.

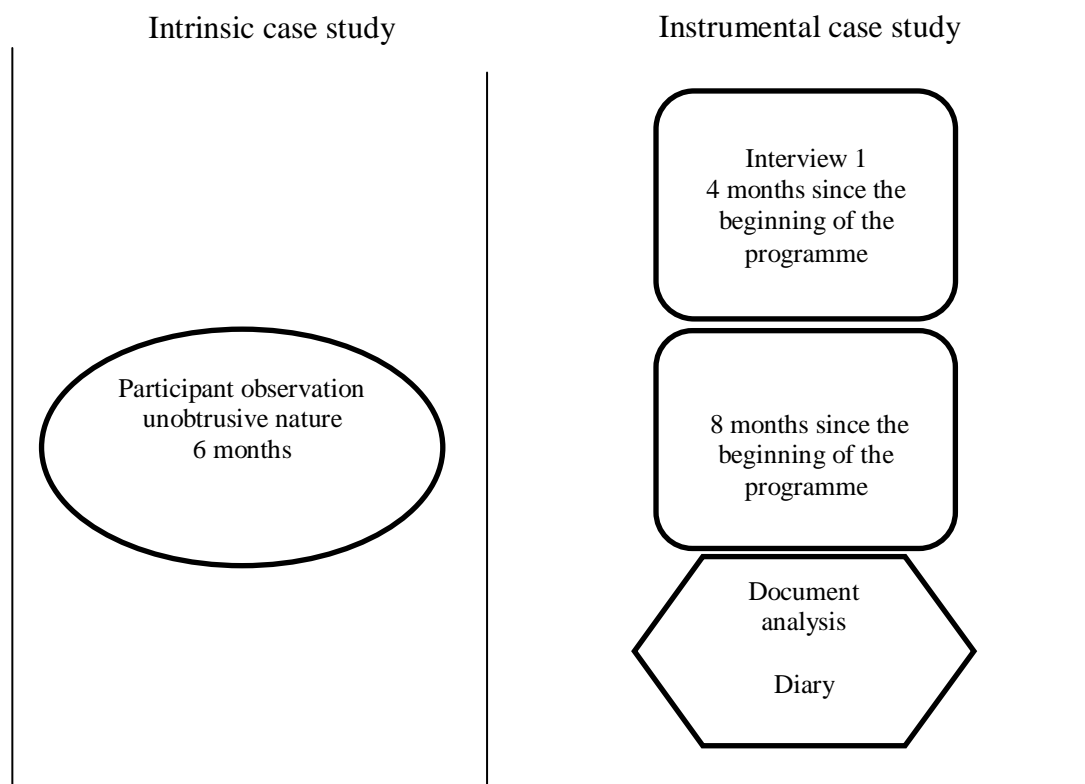


Figure 1. The data collection process

In addition the student has provided a diary, which was used by the researchers as a supplementary source of evidence within a single case study research framework (McCulloch, 2004; Yin, 2014). To analyse the data thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; King & Horrocks, 2010) was employed by the researchers.

FINDINGS

As a result of the study four broad areas were identified as themes revealing how the Erasmus student mobility programme can be arranged more effectively at Ukrainian university: transparency of the process; communication; living conditions; learning process and facilities.

Transparency of the Process

The research participant identified the lack of the transparency of the entire mobility process and its particulars. Despite the numerous attempts of the student to obtain the relevant guidelines regarding the timeframe for the submission of the supporting documents, it was

not possible for the coordinating institution to provide it.

'On Monday I received an e-mail saying, that I need to submit a number of documents by the end of the week. It was really stressful as at that time I was preparing for the exams at my university at home. It would be much easier for me if I knew the information about when and what is required in advance.'

'I was also asking what about the insurance? It took two weeks to get a reply and actually it was not informative, because the answer was that I need to ask a person in an insurance company.'

As was mentioned by the research participant the information that was available at the time of considering the mobility option was scarce. The knowledge that the student got from the home university at the initial stage was less than needed to participate in the programme. Furthermore without the clear guidance on

timescale of the various milestones of the programme the participant indicated that the subsequent actions were often made by him in a rush, thus leaving the limited time for the evaluation to be made by the student, his parents and the staff at home university.

The research participant also stated that even at the preparatory stage he was not certain whether to proceed further with the application.

'I would say that a potential Erasmus student would withdraw from the programme at this stage. In my case it was different, because I really wanted to participate in this student mobility programme and I was enthusiastic. Even when the process was not explained in details, I said to myself, that it is worth of trying to get things sorted. But if you ask other students at my university, they certainly would not be so much committed and very likely that they give up at this stage.'

Communication

The second area, to which the research participant directed the attention of the researchers and where the improvements can be made in order to facilitate wider student mobility, is the communication mechanisms. Thus, the research participant identified a number of difficulties, which he had experienced. With its linkage to the transparency theme, identified earlier, this area highlights the possibility for the communication process to be improved between the project coordinating university and the host University, as well as internal communication between the departments of the host university.

'From my opinion, a lot in this programme depends on the support from the co-ordinating institution and host institution. I didn't know who to communicate with in coordinating institution. Nobody ever asked me about my satisfaction and the level of the fulfilment of my expectations'

'The host university... from my experience they are still not prepared to act as proper host university for Erasmus students. The way they approached any issues, which I had... I experienced constant delays and often no response at all.'

As was pointed out by the research participant, the staff at the host department was not aware about the Erasmus programme, its rules and requirements. This brought an extra difficulty in communicating the information as the only point of contact for the student was the department of international affairs of the university. Thus, any information requested by the student had to be passed through this department, which often caused delays and late responses.

'Even the social events, which took place within the university... I become aware of them from the students, but not from anybody from the coordinating department or host department. Often the information about the event came through when the actual event is over.'

As was noted by the research participant, because the participation in this programme was limited to one student, he experienced some disconnectedness from the wider student community. This has had its impact on the participation in the social life of the faculty and the university. Although the student union was effective in arranging various events at both the university and the faculty levels, the communication with the Erasmus student was not organised appropriately due to attendance of the course modules with various groups of student at all levels of studying. Thus the necessity of the Erasmus student to belong to a smaller student group has been emphasised, however as was explained by the faculty administrative staff this was not possible because of the practical reasons.

Living Conditions

The third theme, which was identified by the research participant relates to the living conditions at the student campus. The university has a wide range of student halls of residence, which is considered as low priced accommodation in comparison with the counterpart in various parts of Europe. The student acknowledged that he was aware of lower standards in Ukraine, but the choice to stay in student accommodation had to be made before he has arrived. Thus because of a number of reasons, including safety and limited information about the alternatives, the decision was made to stay at the University hostel.

'I didn't expect to have such poor

conditions. I didn't expect much, but the place was full of cockroaches. There was neither kettle nor microwave. From what I have experienced so far the university is not determined to do much to improve the living conditions at the hostel.'

'When I arrived the internet was not available in the hostel. I was keeping asking to help me with the connection to the internet, but didn't receive any response. Thus I had to go to the market, buy the cable and connect it myself.'

As was emphasised by the research participant a number of the issues with the accommodation remained unresolved.

Learning Process and Facilities

The fourth theme, which covered the learning process and facilities, was developed by the researchers. The adaptation to the host country and institution environment is of a great importance for the Erasmus students. The research participant admitted numerous differences from his home university including the compulsory attendance of all classes with extensive control of presence and inability to obtain feedback from the tutors upon the completion of various tasks. For the researchers, this area uncovered a considerably broader challenge that the Ukrainian system of higher education is facing. Thus the participant pointed out to the ability and readiness of the Ukrainian universities to integrate into the European 'system of knowledge creation' as a result of the Bologna initiatives.

Another issues, which was identified relates to the opening hours of library and other buildings as well as availability of the space for out-of-class studying and team working.

'I have experienced the lack of spaces where I can study or seat. The places are very limited. If you are not at the class, but still would like to study, you don't have any opportunity because there is no space at all. What if a student needs to work on the assignment after the classes? The library is open only till 5 pm. How can you visit it if you've got classes in the afternoon?'

This has been extended further by the research participants as he denoted a very small number

of the wireless internet 'hot-spots' and lack of IT support in the University. As the research participant believes this may create the appropriate environment for faster learning.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As study abroad often is perceived as a mean of academic enhancement, the willingness of the European student to participate in Erasmus student mobility programme and study abroad in less developed country in a university, in which an academic quality is lower than in the home country, attracted the attention of the authors of this paper. We believe that this single case study provides a unique opportunity to get an insight into complex inward student mobility issues in the Ukrainian context and to look at the studied issue from the point of view of the research participant. Moreover, from the methodological point of view this technique proved to be appropriate for exploration of the situation, in which the knowledge about inward student mobility in Ukraine is limited. Thus, the transformations are required with regards to transparency of the process, communication, living conditions and learning process and facilities.

Despite the willingness of the Ukrainian university to expedite the integration into European system of higher education through participating in the Erasmus programme of student mobility, the failure to recognise the range of the associated transformations can be one of the key obstacles to further development.

The study reveals that the decision making of the prospective inward Erasmus students can be not in favour of Ukrainian universities due to the lack of the transparency of the process of the selection at host University in Ukraine. The student faced numerous difficulties in getting the relevant information about the programme and the deadlines for document submission were not set up. The communication process itself was highlighted by the research participant as the obstacle for the participation. Thus the student was not informed initially whom to communicate on the faculty. The information about the availability of courses was delayed a number of times and therefore student was not certain about his curriculum. We believe that this can be addressed by the host through establishing a clear communication pattern, which may include information about the

responsible person (and the list of their duties) as the guidance for the document submission deadlines.

Among other difficulties in communication process the one, which raised concerns during the study period was disconnectedness from the wider student community. This was due to only one student studying at the host university on Erasmus programme and being him enrolled to different levels of studying. This potentially could have been addressed if the student could belong to a smaller student group within the faculty.

The difficulties related to the living conditions were highlighted by the student at the start of this programme of study and throughout it. The expectations of the student regarding the condition of the university accommodation were not met. This affected his learning capabilities and subsequent in class performance as significant amount of time was required to be spent in the hall of residence without appropriate connection to the internet and the facilities. We believe this can be addressed by the university through the improvements in the accommodation arrangements.

The adaptation of the student to the learning environment at host university is perceived as the most significant obstacle, that need to be addressed. The research participant assigned a high priority to the need of convergence of the learning programmes and ways of teaching at host and home universities. Furthermore improvements of learning facilities, library in particular and the internet access on campus are needed in order to improve the experience of the students.

Taking into consideration that a case study relies greatly on subjective data, the authors expect some critique regarding the utilisation of a single case study approach, however following Schofield (2000) the choice was influenced by a set of special characteristics, which as authors believe, do not narrow down the application of the findings to a wider context. The expectable critique often posed by the protagonists of large-N quantitative studies is related to the generalizability of the research findings (Goertz & Mahoney, 2013). Therefore, the generalizability concept within the boundaries of this research acquired a significant degree of interest. Thus, the generalizability changes its form into naturalistic (Stake, 2000) with the elements of empirical and intuitive

understanding in the centre of it. As this type of generalisation requires from both the researcher and the reader certain experience in the studied area, the tacit knowledge about the phenomenon as a result of participant observation was crucial.

The decision to study a single case was not based on the need to understand other cases, but rather to understand and provide particulars. The researchers share the view that this approach 'proliferates', but does not restrict or narrow the understanding of the phenomenon of inward student mobility in Ukraine. Also the authors believe that this single case study can contribute to the development of field of research interest on student mobility, which is not limited by Erasmus mobility programme. This single case may act as an "eye-opener" revealing the areas, in which improvements are needed.

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