The academic mobility of Lithuanian students: Trends, experiences and challenges

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Abstract

The international academic cooperation between higher education institutions and the encouragement of academic mobility have become one of the priorities of Lithuania's higher education policy, consistently with the European Bologna process and the Lithuania Progress Strategy 2030 approved by Lithuanian Government in 2012. Lithuanian higher education institutions encounter the challenge to promote student mobility with the aim to develop students' cultural awareness, transferable competences and, most importantly, to strengthen students' employability. As the official statistical data reveals quite steady growth in outgoing student numbers in Lithuania, the mobility rate is still insufficient. The paper aims to explore the empirical findings on the experiences of outgoing students with the focus on their intentions for educational mobility, their expectations and the factors influencing their satisfaction with study quality. Teaching quality, career prospects, increased employability possibilities, learning-oriented environment and the organisation of study process were listed as the main elements that effect students' satisfaction on studies and internship.

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1. Introduction

Research context and problem statement. Academic mobility is one of the main factors that consolidates the European area of higher education and is defined in a number of educational policy documents on European education systems as an added value process for youth involved in studies. The European Commission's Green Paper 'Promoting the learning mobility of young people' (2009) emphasises that academic mobility is seen as the incentive for youth to strengthen their future employability as well as their personal development. The means of promoting academic mobility for students in EU area are defined in the Sorbonne Declaration (1998), Bologna Declaration (1999), Berlin Communique (2003) and the Leuven Communiqué (2009) with the vision of making an important contribution to the competitiveness in labour market and the cohesion of the European Union.

The implementation of goals defined in 'Europe 2020 strategy' (to strive for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth) make demands on the EU countries to release youth potential and, first of all, to take care about education quality and the flexible learning opportunities. European higher education institutions, respectively, meet the challenges to reinforce their international attractiveness for students and ensure the satisfaction on studies abroad.

It is worth mentioning that the academic mobility is both on the agenda of education policy and research studies. The researchers focus on the relationship between academic mobility and immigration (Tremblay, 2005), the models and trend defining international student mobility (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007), factors that determine student mobility (Bouwel & Veugelers, 2009; Caruso & Wit, 2013), the impact of academic mobility for further studies, employability and career modelling (Bracht et al., 2006; Rivza & Teichler, 2007). The Lithuanian scholars also do investigate the problems of academic mobility: personal traits that determine inclination for international mobility (Kaniusonyte, Truskauskaite & Gervinskaite, 2012), the relationship between social capital and student mobility (Guscinskiene & Ciburiene, 2013), the internationalisation manifestation in higher education with the focus on academic mobility (Guscinskiene & Ciburiene, 2014) and others.

The analysis of documents and research papers on academic mobility implies the new challenges for Lithuanian higher education institutions to successfully integrate Lithuanian students into the common area of the EU higher education and to promote high-quality academic mobility. Therefore, the academic mobility remains a complex problem, which calls for inquiring into the preferences and experiences of students and aims to answer *what factors influence the academic mobility of Lithuanian students and determine their satisfaction on studies in foreign destination country.*

Research object—academic mobility of Lithuanian students.

Research aim is to define the trends and factors of Lithuanian student academic mobility and their satisfaction.

Research methods: research literature analysis and meta analysis, questionnaire survey, statistical analysis of data.

2. The trends of academic mobility in Europe

Academic mobility, as the European Commission's Green Paper 'Promoting the learning mobility of young people' (2009) emphasises, is important for all age groups, and especially for the academic youth in tertiary education. The studies abroad in universities and colleges increase their cultural awareness, help gaining academic knowledge and professional competences and strengthen their future employability.

Academic mobility of students can range from short-term credit mobility at bachelor, masters and PhD level, to mobility for the purpose of obtaining a degree (diploma mobility), to international placements and internships of various durations. In this part of the paper, authors analyse the academic student mobility from statistical point of view, referring to 32 European countries ('Europe 32 area': EU-27 members, EFTA-4 members and Turkey) and the word 'mobility' is attributed to the studied carried out by foreign students and mobile students that crossed national borders for the purpose of studying.

The analysis of educational mobility of students in Europe revealed that the number of incoming and outgoing students increased in the period of 2002–2012 as well as the student population in higher education sector. The extent of mobility, however, differs in each European country (Eurostat, 2015). The biggest amount of mobile students is observed in Germany, France, Greece and Italy. Under the period of analysis, the significant increase in student mobility has been observed in new EU members: Poland, Romania, Slovakia and the Baltic States, especially in Lithuania.

Going back to the period of 2002–2003, the most frequent nationality of foreign students in 32 European countries was Chinese (more than 6%), the next three most frequent nationalities were German (5%), Greek (4%) and French (4%) (Eurodata, 2006:7). And, only 2% of students from the USA studied in European universities.

According to Eurodata (2006:8), the most frequent countries of study abroad of Europe 32 area for students were Germany and the United Kingdom, hosting together 38% of all study abroad students from other 32 Europe countries. France and Spain were hosting, respectively, 8% and 5% of Europe 32 area students. Besides, more than 60% of all foreign students in Europe 32 area studied in one of these three countries: the United Kingdom (19%), Germany (21%) and France (8%).

Students from Central and Eastern European countries chose the studies in Germany, the United Kingdom and France. Germany as top destination was important for all Europe 32 area students from Central and Eastern Europe, especially for Polish and Bulgarian as well as Czech, Latvian and Lithuanian students.

In 2006–2007, there were over 1.5 million foreign students enrolled at institutions of tertiary education in Europe 32 area (Mapping mobility, 2011:33). The number of foreign students in the Europe 32 region grew very fast by 0.4 million persons since 2002–2003. In this period, the majority of foreign students were with non-Europe 32 area nationalities (58%), while students from Europe 32 area made up a smaller part of mobility students (38.2%). In the period of 2002–2003 till 2006–2007, number of students with foreign and home nationalities was constantly increasing; therefore, the share of foreign students of all students in the Europe 32 countries also grew from 5.8% in 2002–2003 to 6.9% in 2006–2007 (Mapping mobility, 2011).

The period of 2006–2007, similarly to 2002–2003, revealed that the UK, Germany and France were the countries with the largest numbers of foreign students. These three countries attract about two-thirds of all foreign students in all Europe 32 countries (with European and non-European nationalities).

In 2006–2007, the single largest nationality group amongst foreign students was Chinese (123,000 students), who made up the share of 8.2% of all foreign nationality students in the Europe 32 area. The second large nationality group amongst foreign students were Germans with a total number of 75,000 students. Other nationalities were French (53,000), Italians (41,000), Poles (39,000), Turks (38,000) and Greeks (36,000) (Mapping mobility, 2011:42). Although the share of foreign students from non-European countries has increased, 'neighbouring nationalities' (mostly from Europe) still dominate in a considerable number of countries. This tendency was observed in many countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and especially in Southeast Europe. This tendency is determined by

historical ties, cultural proximity and linguistic links which still have a strong impact on the nationality composition of foreign students in many countries.

Although student mobility in the EU countries has been increasing every year in 2012, the average mobility rate for the EU was rather low at 3.6% for incoming and 3.5% for outgoing students (Eurostat, 2014). This average, however, obscures huge variation across member states. More than half of tertiary students from Cyprus, Luxembourg and Liechtenstein were enrolled in another European country in 2012. In contrast, 11 EU member states showed rather low outbound mobility levels below 3%, particularly in the United Kingdom and Spain. Many Eastern European countries (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and etc.) had a significant flow of outgoing students, but very few incoming ones (Eurostat, 2014). In 2011, foreign students in Lithuania stood for 2.5% of total number of students. The average of EU-27 was 3.3%. Lithuania was amongst three countries (Malta and Turkey stood at 0.1% each) that received the lowest number of students from the EU. These students made up 0.2% of total number of students. Latvia, respectively, had 0.6% of these students and this rate in Estonia is close to the average of the EU—3.1% (MOSTA, 2013).

When analysing the trends of student academic mobility in Lithuanian higher education, it becomes obvious that the country has been far better involved into Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) under Erasmus programme. Since the beginning of the LLP (in 1999–2000), Lithuania has sent the highest number of students, or 19,151, followed by Latvia with 10,674 and then Estonia with 5,691 Erasmus student participants (Lifelong Learning Programme, 2014:10). In the period from 2007–2008 to 2012–2013, Latvia and Lithuania had a substantial imbalance in terms of incoming and outgoing Erasmus student numbers for studies as their mobility during the LLP programme period had higher numbers of outgoing students than incoming. Only Estonia had 7% higher numbers of incoming Erasmus students for studies and that is the best balance between the Baltic countries (Lifelong Learning Programme, 2014:15).

The trends of academic mobility in European Higher Education Area (EHEA) imply that mobility seems currently to be a relatively minor phenomenon and does not reach significant values compared with the total numbers of students enrolled in higher education. South and East European countries tend to have more outbound mobility, while West European countries have more incoming students. The average number of students studying in the EHEA coming from any country from abroad reaches slightly less than 4% (The European higher education, 2012). The low inbound mobility can generally be seen as a sign of the attractiveness of a country's higher education and its financial and institutional capacity for enrolling foreign students. Outward mobility, on the other hand, might be a result of policies encouraging students to spend part of their studies abroad (Eurostat, 2014).

The analysis of academic mobility of Lithuanian higher education students revealed that according to the numbers of incoming students from the EU countries, Lithuania is amongst the three EU members and states candidates with the smallest rates of these students although the numbers of Lithuanian outgoing students has been constantly growing. Aiming for 20% of mobility rate to be reached in 2020 in Lithuanian higher education, the research has to focus on the ways of improving study quality and defining the factors that determine students' intentions to study abroad and their satisfaction on studies.

3. Empirical research and its results

3.1. Research design

The empirical research of Lithuanian higher education students' mobility is based on the probability sampling of random selection, where each person (or group) of the population has equal opportunities to be included into the sample, irrespective of individual features or differences.

The students of Lithuanian higher education institutions make up the target group. According to the data of the Lithuanian Department of Statistics, in the academic year of 2010–2011, 184,143 students were enrolled in Lithuanian higher education institutions, of which males stood at 41% (75,482 students) and females made up 59% (108,661 students). The biggest group of respondents (52%) consisted of participants aged 17–21 years old, while the smallest group was made of Lithuanian higher education students aged 38–42 years old. The sample size is 1,227 with the margin of error ±3% is relevant to the general population (Dattalo, 2008).

The instrument of the research is a questionnaire for Lithuanian higher education students is composed from three criteria and their indicators: *the experience of Lithuanian higher school students' academic mobility* (*destination country* of studies abroad and educational institution, the period of mobility; graduation documents, actions before leaving); *factors that determine the student academic mobility* (groups of factors: personal, economic, socio-cultural, professional and political) and *factors that influence their satisfaction on studies abroad (teaching, career prospects after graduation, study organisation).*

The survey was conducted in March–November 2011. Nearly, 1,227 respondents from 12 universities (71% of the respondents) and 9 non-university (29% of the respondents) Lithuanian higher education institutions participated in the survey.

The following methods of statistical analysis were applied for the analysis of the quantitative data: descriptive statistics and factor analysis. Based on the descriptive statistics, initial processing of the quantitative data was performed while calculating the percentage formatted values. Factor analysis allowed classifying the observed variables into groups, which are united by a factor that could not be observed directly. A method of Principal Components and *Varimax* rotation involving *Kaiser* normalisation were invoked to single out the factors. The sampling adequacy for factor analysis was based on the (p) value of *Bartlett's* sphericity test, when $p = 0.000 < 0.05$, and *Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin* (KMO) measure, when KMO > 0.6 (Vaus, 2004). It was established that the factor analysis should be applied to the empirical data. Statistical data analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS 19 data analysis software package.

3.2. Empirical findings

While analysing the academic mobility of Lithuanian higher education students, the empirical findings are presented in three sections: the experiences of academic mobility, the factors that influence students' academic mobility and the factors that cause the satisfaction about studies.

The academic mobility experiences of Lithuanian higher school students. The survey of 1,224 Lithuanian students in higher schools revealed that 14% of them went for studies abroad. The majority of them moved to the countries of the European Union (the United Kingdom, Ireland, Sweden and Germany) and fewer students choose non-European countries (Turkey, the United States and Canada). Fifty one per cent of them studied at universities, 33% of respondents went to colleges and 16% of respondents—in other types of schools. The majority of surveyed students (63%) went for short-term studies (from 5 to 10 months) as exchange programme students and noted that they had not received the graduation document or obtained the certifications. Twenty one per cent of respondents claimed that the aim of their academic mobility was full degree studies in foreign higher education institution with the graduation diploma. Sixteen per cent of respondents indicated that they had received a qualification document.

The survey of Lithuanian students who studied abroad indicates the channels of information they use for inquiring about professional possibilities and interests. The empirical findings revealed that students tend to use Internet, information of their home institutions and the information and support from the exchange programme coordinator. This source of information was considered as

important by the younger respondents (aged at 17–21). The majority (58%) of respondents used Internet for searching information on the foreign educational institution they wish to attend. The information on accommodation options in the destination foreign country was submitted by home institution (about 50%), and fewer students used Internet and media as additional sources of information.

Factors that influence students' academic mobility. The investigation of respondents' decision to study abroad was based on the analysis of 21 factors that influence their academic mobility in their opinion. The factorial analysis of results aimed to reduce the number of variables and to validate the scale in use by proving that the scale components appear in the same factor and eliminating the components that appear in several factors. The calculated KMO measure equals to 0.788 and indicates that factors influencing Lithuanian higher school students' determination to study abroad are relevant for factorial analysis. The *Varimax* method of orthogonal rotation, applied to the data, enabled to group the factors into five groups with the different strength of impact on respondents' mobility for educational purposes: 1—personal factors; 2—economic factors; 3—socio-cultural factors; 4—professional factors; 5—political factors (see Table 1).

Table 1. Transformed matrix of factors that determine respondents' academic mobility

Factors	Factor groups				
	1	2	3	4	5
Family	0.761				
Relatives	0.798				
Friends	0.791				
Colleagues	0.716				
Family reunion	0.701				
Material conditions		0.766			
Salary		0.829			
Loss of job	0.402	0.487			0.409
Unemployment		0.674			
Employment possibilities abroad		0.644		0.432	
Study price				0.459	
Cultural attractiveness of country			0.825		
Country safety			0.822		
Public social protection			0.607	0.486	
Public educational system				0.617	
Career prospects				0.893	
Possibility to be employed in professional field				0.806	
Tax system of country					0.742
State political legal system			0.456		0.703
Active State policy in labour market			0.427		0.670

The biggest group of factors that determine academic mobility of Lithuanian higher education students is personal factors. This group consists of six factors, out of them the factor of relatives had the most significant impact (factor loading λ = 0.798) for students' determination to leave for studies abroad. Friends (λ = 0.791) and family (λ = 0.761) were revealed as factors of similar significance. In the group of economic factors, the biggest significance was attributed to salary (λ = 0.829) and material conditions (λ = 0.766). The group of socio cultural factors was dominated by the cultural attractiveness of country (λ = 0.825) and country's safety (λ = 0.822), while in the group of professional factors career prospects (λ = 0.893) and possibility to be employed in the

professional field (λ = 0.806) were among the factors with the most significant impact. The group of political factors was dominated by state tax system (λ = 0.742) and political legal system of country (λ = 0.703) with their significant impact on students' determination to leave for studies abroad.

Students' satisfaction on studies abroad. Eighty one per cent of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the studies in foreign higher education institutions. The analysis of study satisfaction abroad was based on 11 factors. Aiming to reduce the big number of variables to more general factors and to validate the scale, the factorial analysis was carried out.

The KMO measure of the factors determining the satisfaction with the studies abroad– 0.677—allows us to conclude that the research data are relevant for a factorial analysis. The results obtained by means of the *Varimax* method of orthogonal rotation were grouped into three groups of factors with the impact of different strength on the respondents' satisfaction on studies abroad: 1—teaching; 2—career prospects after graduation; 3—study organisation (see Table 2).

Table 2. Transformed matrix of factors that determine respondents' satisfaction on studies abroad

Factors	Factor groups		
	1	2	3
Flexible schedule of studies			0.592
Quality of teaching	0.746		
Possibility of distance learning			0.861
Close communication with a lecturer	0.632		
Availability of learning resources			0.443
Learning empowering environment	0.842		
Variety of learning methods	0.740	0.428	
Relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical skills	0.733		
Opportunity of internship in a desirable enterprise		0.748	
Employment possibilities in a desirable enterprise after internship		0.908	
Opportunity to participate in project activities		0.685	

The biggest group of factors is made of factors related to student-centred teaching. This group consists of five factors, with learning empowering environment (λ = 0.842), quality of teaching (λ = 0.746) and variety of learning methods (λ = 0.740) being the most influential factors that determining the satisfaction of the respondents with studies.

In the group of factors of career prospects, the respondents' satisfaction on studies abroad was significantly influenced by the possibilities to employed in a desirable enterprise after internship (λ = 0.908) and to make internship in a desirable enterprise (λ = 0.748), whereas in the group of factors of study organisation, the prevailing factor was the opportunity of distance learning (λ = 0.861) and less influence was attributed to flexible schedule of lectures (λ = 0.592).

4. Discussion

The youth in Lithuanian higher education schools has been encouraged to go abroad to EU-28 countries and non-European countries for the qualification degree, training or exchange studies or internship in foreign enterprises and institutions. Lithuanian Progress Strategy 2030 aims for developing possibilities for Lithuanian higher education students to study abroad for at least one semester with the special emphasis on exchanges between the states of Baltic and Nordic region.

The dynamics of outgoing Lithuanian students revealed that the rates have been constantly increasing. Since 2002, the number of Lithuanian students who strive to obtain the qualification

degree in other EU countries has been growing even though in 2012 the mobility rate was less than 5% of total Lithuanian students. The number of outgoing students under the ERASMUS exchange programme in the period of 2000–2012 increased four times and exceeded the EU average (MOSTA, 2013). This proves the students' intentions to obtain the educational background in the EU countries. The similar trend has been foreseen by Bohm, Davis, Meares and Pearce (2002). They claim that the need to obtain the international educational background will be inherent for 7.2 million of international students in 2025.

The empirical results revealed that the majority of Lithuanian higher education students moved for studies abroad under the exchange programmes. The academic mobility was mainly influenced by the personal factors. The strongest impact on respondents' determination to go abroad for studies comes from student's closest environment (friends, family and relatives). This is based on strong relationship among family members and friends, their support which, as Granovetter (1983) states, is very important for the decision to move. The impact of student's close environment was investigated by Rodrigues (2012) as well.

In the group of economic factors, the greatest influence on student academic mobility has been done by salary and material conditions in destination country. Their significance was emphasised in the research by Gonzalez, Mesanza & Mariel (2011). They claimed that the economic advancement had been an attractive factor for incoming students. This statement supports the trend of Lithuanian students' mobility: they prefer the high welfare and economy level countries such as the UK, Ireland, Sweden, Germany or the USA.

One more important criterion of choosing the destination country is cultural attractiveness and safety in the country. According to Gonzalez et al. (2011), the high crime level in a country is the mobility intention limiting factor. The countries Lithuanian students choose for studies have been attractive not only because of cultural attractions and safety, but also because of expected benefit in professional field and economic status. Students from the countries with lower living standards have the intentions to earn extra money while studying abroad. And, they have more ambitions to get employment in the professional field they studied. These students acknowledge that the experience of studying abroad is valuable assets for future employability, international career prospects and their competitiveness. They gain more advantages in labour market as compared with the ones of the same age group and similar educational background (Clyne & Rizvi, 1998; Frew, 2006; Wiers-Jenssen, 2002).

The empirical evidence highlighted that outgoing Lithuanian students were most satisfied with the learning-oriented educational environment in foreign educational institutions, more specifically, teaching quality and organisation of study process. Similarly, the study by Arambewela and Hall (2009) proved that feedback from lecturers, good access to lecturers and quality of teaching were perceived to be the most important variables influencing international student satisfaction. The authors refer to a number of empirical studies that provide the feedback to students is important given that interaction with lecturers is considered to be an important part of the learning experience during the mobility.

The overview of incoming foreign students' statistics highlighted the fact the majority of foreign students come to Lithuanian higher education institutions under ERASMUS exchange programme, and the full degree students' rates are very small, but with the tendency to increase.

In conclusion, it could be stated that the increasing student academic mobility in Lithuania raise new challenges for higher education institutions. First, the Lithuanian institutions have to develop the strategies for maintaining and increasing study quality according to the European standards and attractive educational environment for students to prevent the brain drain of Lithuanian students. Second, the internationalisation of higher education call for developing new competences of teachers to deal with international student diversity, the construction of new curriculum including

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cultural dimensions into the content, attractive teaching methods and learning outcomes compatible with global and international competencies. Since the rate of inbound mobility is considered to be an indicator of country's higher education attractiveness and reputation, the Lithuanian higher education policies and practices have to focus on dissemination of best practice in the international higher education area, the development of joint study programmes, joint research on promoting study quality initiatives and academic mobility, the development of international student support programs such as counselling, orientation programs and even the part-time employment possibilities.

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