

# International Student Mobility: Limits of the current model

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**Abstract:** Since 2000, the number of students trained abroad has increased 100%. This statistic shows how not only many students but also how future employers value this training. It gives students an additional skill, which can be called "internationality". Accordingly a large number of countries intend to rapidly increase the number of students studying abroad. This trend leads to a model of international student mobility that would be perfect if, first, all students could benefit from it; second, if this model did not create some inequalities; and finally, if it did not cause some distortions in the world that may be economic or academic in nature. This paper shows that this is not the case. It is therefore important to analyse these phenomena in order to find solutions to improve the current model of international student mobility.

**Keywords:** Higher education, foreign students, International student mobility, benefit of international mobility, economic and academic distortions.

## Introduction

Since 2000, the number of students trained abroad has increased by 100%. This statistic not only shows how many students but also how future employers highly value this training. It gives students an additional skill, which can be called "internationality". If it is certainly difficult to measure it, it gives them a clear competitive advantage in the labour market. It even seems now that higher education cannot be complete without a stay abroad of at least three months, ideally one academic year or two semesters. Accordingly a large number of countries intend to rapidly increase the number of students studying abroad; this is for example the case of Germany, which has set a goal "that in the medium term at least one third if not 50% of its graduates would have experience abroad" (Stranes, 2014).

This model would be perfect if, first, all students could benefit from it; second, if this model did not create some inequalities; finally, if it did not cause some distortions that may be economic or academic in nature. This is not the case as we are going to see in the following paragraphs. It is

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therefore important to analyse these phenomena in order to find solutions to improve the current model of international student mobility—the purpose of this paper.

### **Limits of the current model of international student mobility**

The current model of international student mobility (ISM) presents ten limits that can be grouped according to the four categories mentioned in the introduction:

Limits related to the fact that all students worldwide do not benefit from current international mobility.

Two limits can be counted in this category:

- The number of students benefiting from the ISM in the world is very limited.
- It is the most affluent students who mostly benefit from the ISM.

Limits related to the fact that international mobility of students creates inequalities. In this category, two limits can also be identified:

- The top universities organize exchanges between themselves, selective matching, which excludes students from other universities.
- Private universities are developing ISMs benefits more and more.

Limits related to the fact that international student mobility creates economic distortions. In this third category three limits can be counted:

- All countries do not practice the same policy on tuition and fees.
- It is often in the poorest countries where the rate of ISM is the highest.
- It is often the richest countries hosting the largest number of students and hence that are benefiting most from ISM.

Limits related to the fact that the international mobility of students creates distortions in the academic disciplines. In this last category, three limits can be identified:

- ISM leads to a gradual disappearance of disciplines highly specialized and little demanded.
- ISM has the risk of a convergence of academic programs that lead to a convergence of cultures in the world and the use of English as the universal academic language.
- ISM leads to a certain devaluation of diplomas.

### **Improving the present model of international student mobility**

Let us then examine each of these ten limits to explain them further, document them, and attempt every time to reflect on a possible solution to improve the current model of international student mobility.

*Limits related to the fact that all students worldwide do not benefit from current international mobility*

1. The number of students benefiting from the ISM in the world is very limited

In 2013, the number of students in the world training abroad was in the world 4.1 million (UNESCO, 2015). This figure is certainly an increase of 100% compared to 2000, but it represents only 1.8% of the number of students in the world. This means that 98.2% of students, or 218 million, do not benefit from mobility.

If this growth continues, by 2029 there will be 8.2 million students trained abroad. But at the same time, it is likely that the total number of students in the world will also increase. Indeed this number could exceed 262 million by 2025 against 227 at 2013 (David & Mackintosh, 2012). So the percentage of students abroad would rise to 3.1%, which is still modest. In fact, it would mean that 254 million students would not benefit from international mobility, which represents an increase of 17% compared to 2013.

This problem can be solved by multiplying the number of scholarships. The task is huge because the sums involved are enormous. The risk is therefore that quickly existing inequalities, that it is the fact that students of privileged classes in all countries benefit first from ISM unless (see next item) for overseas scholarships, preference is given to students of lower classes.

2. It is the most affluent students who benefit from ISM scholarships

Studying abroad is expensive. It includes the cost of travel, registration fees, rent and living costs; between € 1,500 and € 2,000 per month. Even with a scholarship (in Europe Erasmus allowance is 100 to 320 € per month), only the more affluent students can support themselves without working. For example in France, of the 65,000 students from abroad, 40,000 are from elite colleges that recruit 80% among affluent backgrounds.

The system therefore favours those who are already favoured by destiny to give them, through these studies abroad, a new competitive advantage over other students.

To solve this second problem, it would be appropriate that in each country a minimum percentage of grants could be reserved for students from modest backgrounds. For example, a recent report on the future of higher education in France calls that students of modest means enjoying a European exchange (ERASMUS) be doubled by 2025 (Stranes, 2014).

*Limits related to the fact that international mobility of students produces inequalities*

### 3. The top universities organize exchanges between themselves, selective matching, which excludes students from other universities

To maintain their reputations, the best universities send their students abroad to the universities with the same reputation in order to protect the value of their degree. For example, the High School of Commerce (HEC) in France announced in its doctoral program: "The majority of our brightest students undertake an academic stay abroad in another business school or a research department. Each year, HEC Paris also receives about 3-5 PhD students in exchange from other institutions around the world." Accordingly, a less renowned business school, HEC can only proceed to do student exchanges with lower-ranking schools. A severe segregation process according to the level of students results. Students trained in the best universities have access to the best universities abroad; other students only have access to second class universities. This results in significant inequalities in university curricula and consequently in professional careers.

Another example is the Paris Institute of Political Science (Science po) which is part of the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA), a network of 25 institutions worldwide that exchange in priority their students between them. This limits the possibilities of other less prestigious universities around the world to exchange students with APSIA universities.

The solution to this problem is not easy. Should each university agree that a significant proportion of student enrollment (around 30%?) be reserved for students from modest backgrounds or from universities other than those with which the university maintains privileged relations? Note that in some countries "affirmative action" is already applied at the national level, and this sometimes causes some controversy, particularly in the United States (Long, 2007).

### 4. Private universities are developing ISMs benefits more and more

The private sector has felt that profitable business can be conducted in the field of higher education. There is indeed a demand for shorter, less complex and less difficult studies, allowing degree completion more quickly. Many people, particularly in developing countries, are willing to pay large sums for it. The main difficulty lies in the low quality of education that is lavished.

This calls for new national regulations (Newman, 2014). The OECD with the UNESCO has established guidelines to enforce quality assurance rules by institutions that export to higher education internationally (OECD/UNESCO, 2003). But the application of these principles is not mandatory and is not subject to control, which leaves much room for abuse.

*Limits related to the fact that international student mobility creates economic distortions*

### 5. All countries do not practice the same policy on tuition and fees

The mere fact that in some countries registration fees are either virtually nil even for foreigners or on the contrary very high. France and the United States are examples of these two polar cases. This means that countries where costs are reduced definitely benefit from international enrolment greater than if the costs were the same everywhere. Hence the distortions in the flow of students.

Should we then standardize registration fees? If it seems desirable to reduce distortions, this solution is not feasible however. Note that in Europe some reverse trend is felt. Indeed, as discussed in some countries, the fees between nationals and foreigners could be differentiated.

#### 6. It is often in the poorest countries where the rate of ISM is the highest

Table 1 shows the flow of foreign students to and from the major countries and regions in 2013.

**Table 1. Origin and destination of foreign students (2013)**

Region of origin	Number	Percentage among students in the region of origin	First country of destination
World	4 009 312	1.8	United States, United Kingdom, France, Australia, Germany
Arab countries	310 569	3.5	United Kingdom, France, United States
Central and Eastern Europe	420 518	2.0	United Kingdom, Russia, Germany
Central Asia	156 613	7.5	Russia
East Asia and Pacific	1 143 084	2.0	United Kingdom, United States, Australia, Fiji
Latin America and the Caribbean	203 355	0.9	United States, United Kingdom
North America and Europe	626 571	1.6	United Kingdom, France, United States
South and West Asia	361 100	1.0	United Kingdom, United States, Malaysia
Sub-Saharan Africa	288 198	4.5	France, South Africa, United States
Not specified	499 603		

Source: UNESCO (2015)

As indicated in Table 1, Central Asia is the leading region of origin for international student flows. However, most students in this region are heading to Russia, in continuing this long tradition of inter-regional cultural exchanges.

However, students from the sub-Saharan region, with the second highest rate of flow of students going abroad, often head outside the African continent to go to France and the United States. ISM

rate peaks in the Comoros (55.5%), Swaziland (48.2%), Seychelles (43.5%), Namibia (42.5%), Zimbabwe (29.8%), Gambia (23.8%), Congo (21.7%), Malawi (19.4%), and Mauritius (16.4%). In these countries, many students who go abroad do not return home, hence a significant exodus of human capital. This results in some distortion in trade between developed and developing countries.

The solution to this problem is not the easiest. One could certainly imagine that in the case of the least developed countries, developed countries benefiting from this human capital would pay them some financial compensation. They, in fact, took no part in financing years of schooling of students who come to be trained in their universities and settling permanently in their territories. This approach still has not been seriously considered.

### 7. It is often the richest countries hosting the largest number of students and hence that are benefiting most from ISM

The main countries of destination of the international mobility of students are:

**Table 2. Percentage of students trained abroad in 2013 according to their destination**

United States (18%)	Russian Federation (4%)
United Kingdom (11%)	Japan (4%)
France (7%)	Canada (3%)
Australia (6%)	China (2%)
Germany (5%)	Italy (2%)

Source: UNESCO (2015)

In total, the OECD hosted, in 2013, 67% of foreign students. The estimated annual generated revenue amounts to \$100 billion to over \$150 billion. So it is the universities of OECD countries including the United States, Great Britain, France, Australia and Germany who have seen their funding increase through IMS, other universities in the world benefiting much less. This results in distortions in the trade balances of countries, and we understand why some are betting on a continued increase in the inflow of foreign students. For example, France considers that it will have to double in the next decade the number of foreign students trained there (Stranes, 2014).

Eliminating the imbalances thus created in trade in international services is impossible. But one could consider that the most recipient countries create an international fund to provide scholarships to the poorest students, starting with those located in developing countries.

### 8. ISM leads to a gradual disappearance of highly specialized and little demanded disciplines

The drive to make research profitable has already led to a significant reduction in work areas called "confidential". Indeed, these works can neither find credit to finance them nor scientific journals for publication (Hugonnier, 2016). With ISM, some universities may tend to focus their financial efforts

on the programs most requested by foreign students. This could ultimately lead to the disappearance of other sensitive areas because they are little demanded by students and are so unprofitable.

Again the solution to this problem is not simple and nothing will protect "confidential" disciplines without the willingness of universities to have a minimum budget for them.

*Limits related to the fact that the international mobility of students creates distortions in the academic area*

#### 9. ISM presents the risk of a convergence of academic programs that lead to a convergence of cultures and the use of English as the universal academic language

The convergence of programs is not an explicit goal of ISM nor of the Tuning project, and cultural universalization is not for tomorrow. But we can see some trends in this direction. Cooperation between researchers in the world has never been greater, and it grows fast aided by the internet. Furthermore, besides the international mobility of students, we should also note the high mobility of teachers that develops as well as that of programs and campus, while double degrees are becoming commonplace. All these phenomena contribute to a rapprochement between curricula. Moreover, multinational companies in the world are now asking, in a given sector, identical skills and international organization (OECD and Commission) respond to this by encouraging countries to develop skills strategies that are all quite similar (OECD, 2015). Finally, one cannot ignore that, in many disciplines, it is imperative to publish in English if one is to be read and recognized.

Academic work should focus more on these issues to analyse the extent to which convergence could occur and also evaluate its opportunities and risks to consider actions that could possibly limit it.

#### 10. ISM might lead to a certain devaluation of diplomas

Degrees are always a constant value if the quality of training were identical from one country to another. However such is not the case. So that a student who begins training in a discipline given in his country and then studies abroad, will see his degree devalued if overseas training is of lesser quality than that of his country. This situation can be quite common because it is rare that countries specialize in disciplines that are found with the same quality elsewhere. It is, for example, the case of Latin and Roman history in Italy to take one example in the field of humanities. Solving this problem will not be easy.

Another example of diploma devaluation is the European system with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). For a successful year abroad, one must acquire 60 credits; each credit being worth between 25 and 30 hours. In total it is between 1500 and 1800 hours a year. The advantages of this system are perfect readability and exchangeability of credits; credits are acquired for life; and there is no repetition in case there is no more than six months late. The system is based

solely on quantitative and discretionary addition of elements that have little connection between them. The question is to know what, ultimately, it contributes to a degree.

One possible solution is a modular approach, i.e. a combination of lectures, presentations, debates, briefs, participation, internships, etc. This would leave much space and time for teachers to evaluate both professional and soft skills of students (intra- and interpersonal) and give a much greater sense to diploma.

## Conclusion

The international mobility of students has significant limits. It would be interesting to conduct further research to measure comparatively the effects of these phenomena to identify those who are the most consistent and on which public policy to give priority.

This paper has attempted to show, in front of each of these ten limits, there is often a solution for constructing a model of international mobility of students which is less elitist, more social, fairer and more efficient—a model that is also "more humanistic and does not amount to a global market vision of higher education" (Stranes, 2014).

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