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Executive Summary

A summary of the key findings of the HEFCE study into international student mobility

Attachment(s)

None

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HEFCE study on International Student Mobility

Introduction

1. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), amongst others, has produced a report on the patterns of UK students' international mobility. The other funders of the project were: Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC), Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), Department of Employment and Learning Northern Ireland (DEL), Department for Education and Skills (DfES), Association of Higher Education European Officers (HEURO), British Universities Transatlantic Exchange Association (BUTEX) and the British Council. Universities UK and the Europe Unit also supported the study which takes into account the types of mobility available to students, the systems in place in UK HEIs for mobility programmes and the general attitudes of staff and students to pursuing work and study abroad.
2. This Europe note summarises the key findings of the study, the full text of which can be found at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2004/04_30

Background and aims

3. Concerns over the low level of outward student mobility from the UK compared with the mobility of other European countries inspired the study. Fears existed that in not engaging in international mobility, too small a proportion of UK students are developing a multilingual perspective, thereby putting the UK at a competitive disadvantage in the developing global economy.
4. The aim of the study was to gather information which would help all organisations with a stake in international student mobility including the DfES, UK higher education institutions and the funding councils, to understand the range and types of mobility available and the current trends being displayed.

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Methodology

5. The study was framed by eight key questions:
 - What is student mobility – how can it be defined?
 - What trends can be identified in UK international student mobility and how do these compare with other countries?
 - What are the main determining factors influencing students' mobility choices?
 - To what extent is it useful to relate student mobility during the programme of study to prior mobility such as the gap year?
 - What are perceived to be the main benefits of spending a period of time studying or working abroad?
 - What are the main barriers to international mobility for UK students?
 - How important is UK students' foreign-language knowledge in conditioning their propensity for international mobility?
 - What are the main institutional factors driving, or constraining, student mobility?

6. The answers to these questions were collected using three surveys:
 - a review of the currently available statistics on UK, EU and international mobility;
 - a questionnaire to all UK HEIs to gain the 'institutional perspective';
 - site visits to 10 UK HEIs to gain first hand information on the 'student perspective'.

Findings of the study – where the UK fits in in the international picture

7. Global mobility, according to the study, has grown considerably over the past 25 years – reflecting the move towards the global knowledge economy. The primary finding of the study was that the overall number of UK students spending a period of time abroad as part of their studies has increased. However, it also showed that the numbers of UK participants in the Erasmus scheme has declined. The increase referred mainly to outward mobility to countries where students can be taught in English. The study showed a decline in outward mobility to EU countries reflecting a decrease in students enrolling on language degree courses.

8. The US and Australia were easily the most popular destinations for the UK's mobile student population. Mobility to the EU accounted for less than half of the UK's outward student mobility and the report found that although the UK's outgoing student numbers were higher than those of the US or Australia they were lower than those of France and Germany. OECD data used in the study showed that 43 per cent of outgoing UK students went to countries where a language other than English was spoken. This is a smaller percentage than the majority of the other European countries included in the study.¹

9. The report shows that, comparatively, on a global level, the UK does not have a low level of outward mobility. However, when the comparison is made with the outward mobility figures of fellow EU member states, the UK compares less favourably. The report cites the reasons behind this as being that: *'the scale of the flows is influenced by size of country of origin, its geographical remoteness, its institutional proximity to a specific student exchange system and the strength or otherwise of language barriers'*.
10. Students reported that financial considerations are the most important deterrent to studying abroad, closely followed by lack of linguistic ability.

Mobility within the Erasmus programme

11. The Erasmus mobility programme accounts for approximately one-third of all student mobility in Europe. The UK has been the largest host nation within the Erasmus programme and it has also been the member state with the largest imbalance of incoming and outgoing students. The statistics used in the report show that the countries with a significant element of their HE system taught in English are the main net recipients of students, while countries who teach through the medium of other languages are the primary net senders of students.
12. Until the mid-1990s, UK outgoing Erasmus student numbers steadily rose. However, since 1994-1995, when the number of participants in the programme reached 11,998, participation has been in decline. In 2002-2003, the UK outgoing participation figure was down to 7,956. During this decline, the incoming mobility figure has been almost twice the outgoing figure.
13. The study found that many UK HEIs are seeking to reduce this imbalance of incoming and outgoing students, and the associated financial burden it generates, by redirecting mobility from the rest of Europe to North America and Australia, amongst other destinations.
14. The study went on to explore some of the factors behind the decline in UK participation in the programme. The key factors identified as potentially having a bearing on these figures were: the profile of the students participating in the programme; the decrease in numbers of students learning languages in the UK; the nature and level of institutional involvement in the Erasmus programme.
 - **Student profile:** the report found that students involved in the Erasmus programme are more likely to be *"female, white and from families in the higher social classes, when compared with other students"*. These statistics seem to indicate that student mobility choices are significantly affected by social status.
 - **Language learning:** the figures for the decline in language learning in UK higher education fairly evenly match the figures for decline in participation in the Erasmus

programme. There has been a decrease in outgoing Erasmus participants to 68 per cent of 1995-96 figures. There has been a concurrent decline in language learning to 72 per cent of the 1995-96 level.

- **Institutional involvement:** overall, the report found that institutional involvement in the Erasmus programme has declined, with some institutions withdrawing from the programme altogether and the remaining ones reducing their involvement. This trend did not apply to each of the UK HEIs questioned, however the figures underline the importance of the institution's role in contributing to Erasmus participation and outgoing student numbers. Across HEIs, institutional involvement with the Erasmus programme was shown to be closely related to the language teaching capacity of the institution. Business studies and research also showed a similar influence on outgoing Erasmus mobility numbers.

Mobility under non-Erasmus programmes

15. The European Commission's Leonardo programme offers students work placements of three months or more in Europe to develop their vocational skills. Similar to the Erasmus scheme, UK involvement in Leonardo suffers from an imbalance of incoming to outgoing students.

Institutional type

16. The study indicated the differences in outgoing mobility between different types of institutions. The pre-1992 universities account for the majority of outgoing student mobility. In fact, their share has increased from half in 1995-96 to two-thirds of the total in 2002-03. The post-1992 institutions saw their share drop from 40 per cent in 1995-96 to 25 per cent in 2002-03. In addition, pre-1992 universities were found to be more successful in retaining their European links with other institutions – in Erasmus and non-Erasmus schemes.

Drivers and barriers to mobility

17. In investigating the current trends in international student mobility, the study examined the factors that may encourage or discourage students to become mobile. In questioning both staff and students, the two primary barriers to students going abroad appeared to be finance and language.

- **The lack of adequate finance** was the most frequently cited reason by students for their reluctance to go abroad, with nearly half of all students questioned listing this as a 'very important' contributor to their decision.
- **The general absence of foreign language knowledge** was also a key factor in discouraging students from studying abroad, with some students worried that studying a foreign language was too far removed from their core subject.
- **Other reasons** for disinclination towards mobility included a lack of information on the options available, actual and perceived academic barriers (course structure, credit transfer etc) and attitudinal factors (fear of the unknown etc).

Other findings and conclusions

18. A further finding of the study was that few institutions have a specific plan for outgoing mobility, with the institutional focus nearly always resting on the inward recruitment of high-fee paying international students.
19. The study concluded by stating that it had itself demonstrated a need for more complete and regularly-collected data on international student mobility and in summary, the concluding policy implications are:
 - HEIs could be more proactive in promoting student mobility, balancing it against the priority to recruit high-fee overseas students.
 - Information and publicity about HE mobility schemes could be expanded, and targeted at schools and further education colleges.
 - Consideration needs to be given to language learning at all levels in the UK education system.
 - Consideration needs to be given to how access to mobility can be broadened; at present many students are 'socially excluded' from mobility opportunities because of their financial situation, family and class background, and linguistic limitations.

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ⁱ OECD (2001) *Student Mobility Between and Towards OECD Countries. Report prepared for the Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry*. Paris: OECD