



Unlocking the potential of Erasmus+ in the Western Balkans

A Students' Perspective

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Donor



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Key points

- It is widely believed that international student scholarship programmes encourage international cooperation, stability, skills exchange and the remittance of knowledge to applicants' home countries. However, an emerging concern in the Western Balkans (WB) is that the region's university students have greater opportunities to interact on 'neutral ground' outside the WB than they do within the region, and often find the incentives for returning to the region limited following study abroad.
- Despite their clear positive benefits for young people and countries they link together, and contrary to the intentions of the institutions that have established them around the world, such programmes are acquiring a reputation for motivating students to leave their home countries and facilitating their departure.
- The antidote to fears over 'brain drain' in the region is to create a more conducive environment for the circulation and use of skills, experience and knowledge acquired through international student mobility programmes within the region, including by valuing these assets within public sector recruitment processes and inclusively fostering a more socio-economically hospitable environment for the region's young people.
- As part of this, a new initiative to create an Erasmus-style student exchange programme within the WB has the potential to mirror the clear benefits such programmes have delivered within the European Union (EU), including by:
 - helping expand regional cooperation,
 - boosting the retention of knowledge and skills – and reversing the significant challenge posed by 'brain drain',
 - intensifying regional economic integration, and
 - generating more opportunities for young professionals to find employment within the WB.



Introduction

Over the past decade, students from the Western Balkans (WB) [1] have increasingly participated in academic mobility programs, especially from 2014 after the Erasmus+ programme replaced the original Erasmus programme. Yet their subsequent behaviour has been insufficiently researched within the field of migration research. To address this knowledge gap, this study investigates patterns in the migration of students following periods of academic mobility. In particular, it examines the willingness and motivation of young people who have benefitted from academic mobility programs such as Erasmus+ to stay in the WB – or emigrate from the region – after their studies abroad conclude. It then draws on this analysis as the basis for a series of recommendations that make the case for an Erasmus-style scheme for the WB region.

Data and methodology

The study is based in the first instance on a review of literature related to migration, development studies, and international student mobility with a particular focus on the WB. The review of books, journals, working papers, and policy briefs was the basis for a conceptual framework describing the interrelation between migration, international student mobility, and retention/loss of knowledge and skills within the region.

Using this conceptual framework, the paper then provides case study analysis on migration patterns of university students from the WB who have benefitted from student exchange programmes and studied abroad. To shed light on this part of the research, the study follows Mayring's (2010) qualitative content analysis methodology and uses in-depth interviews as a tool for exploring and addressing the themes raised in the research.

[1] The Western Balkans/Western Balkan region/six WB countries in this research refers to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia.

Limitations

The qualitative data on which this research is based was collected through a series of in-depth interviews with internationally mobile students from the region. As a result of this approach, the study does not provide a comprehensive picture. Nor could it: given that research on the mobility of WB students is so underdeveloped, statistical data is often non-existent, unreliable, or figures differ between data sources; and there are no uniform national data-sets tallying students from the WB who have studied abroad. It is therefore necessary to rely on various institutional reports containing statistical data on student participation in exchange programmes in order to begin filling the knowledge gap in this area of research.

Defining 'international students' and 'internationally mobile students'

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Eurostat define international students as those who are not residents of their country of study, as well as those who received their prior education in another country (OECD, 2013). For Kelo et al. (2006), an internationally mobile student is a student who crosses a national border to study for a certain period of time in the country to which he/she has moved. According to this definition, crossing a national border is a crucial prerequisite for being an internationally mobile student.

Background: global student mobility and Erasmus+

The internationalisation of higher education is a phenomenon that has been rapidly growing, turning 21st century universities into globalised institutions of knowledge transfer. It has prompted higher education institutions to evolve considerably, via new policies and procedures to attract more international students from across the world. To foster international student mobility, governments, non-governmental institutions and supra-governmental bodies such as the European Commission (EC) have established scholarship programmes attracting the best and the brightest to study at the world's most prestigious higher education institutions. A key aim of such scholarship programmes is to support successful students from developing countries to gain skills and knowledge that can subsequently benefit their home countries. In most cases this implies that scholarship recipients will return to their home countries after completing their academic exchange programmes.

The turn from the 20th to the 21st century has witnessed some of the most tangible advances in the internationalisation of higher education. According to the OECD (2013), the number of international students who started their study abroad period more than doubled between 2000 and 2011.^[2] The OECD (2019), estimates a 19 percent increase in international student flows into the OECD area between 2013 and 2016.

Internationalisation of higher education has been strongly championed by the EU. For its part, the EU hosted 1.7 million internationally mobile students in 2017 alone – a 22 percent increase over the 2013 figure (Eurostat, 2019). This includes both EU and non-EU international students studying at EU universities. While mobile university students represent 8.1 percent of all students enrolled in the EU in 2017, Eurostat (2019) points to wide variations in the level of international student enrolment across the EU: the largest shares were evident in Luxembourg (47 percent), Cyprus (23 percent) and Austria (17 percent), while the lowest shares of international students were recorded in Croatia, Spain and Greece (all 3 percent).^[3]

^[2] Whereas 2.1 million students enrolled at foreign universities in 2000, 11 years later the figure had reached 4.3 million.

^[3] This implies that only 3 percent of students holding Spanish citizenship were enrolled in a full-time degree university programme in another EU country. However, these numbers are quite different when it comes to international exchange programmes such as Erasmus+, widely used by Spanish students.

The key EU vehicle facilitating international student mobility has been the Erasmus funding programme – originally established in 1987. It has been operating in the EU for well over 30 years and is known today as Erasmus+. It offers university students in the WB region (and other countries throughout Europe and the world) the possibility of studying or doing an internship abroad in another country for between 2 and 12 months per cycle of studies. The programme also offers full-degree joint master and PhD programmes lasting between 12 and 48 months, depending on the programme and course involved. This study explores Erasmus+ exchange programmes as a blueprint for transnational cooperation among university students.

International student mobility has raised many questions related to students who stay in the host country after graduating, a phenomenon quantified as the average retention rate (Gérard and Sanna, 2017). According to a study by Felbermayr and Reczkowski (2014), 35 percent of international students surveyed stayed in the United Kingdom (UK) after graduating, while only 5 percent of the sample surveyed stayed in continental Europe. Exploring the migration behaviour of European students who obtained a PhD in the United States (US), Van Bouwel and Veugelers (2014) concluded that 70 percent of them found their first job there. When it comes to Europe itself, Erasmus+ represents a programme that has been fundamentally shaping continent's migration patterns since it was founded in 1987.

Seen as 'one of the most positive EU results' (EC, 2018b), over the last three decades Erasmus+ has supported international exchanges for more than 9 million students and volunteers (EC, 2018a). According to Eurostat (2019a), the programme enabled 193,000 bachelor's and master's level students to study across Europe in 2017 alone. France, Germany and Spain have sent most Erasmus+ students abroad, while Spain, Germany and the UK were the top three destinations for incoming Erasmus+ students that year.^[4] Placing great emphasis on mobility, the EU proposed to invest over €28 in Erasmus+ for 2021–2027 budgetary period with 70% of the budget supporting mobility opportunities and cross-border cooperation projects (EC, 2021). Adopted in 2018, this proposal involved doubling of the budget, which is expected to enable 12 million young people, including those from the WB region, to take part in the programme (EC, 2020).^[5]

^[4] Spain was the most frequent destination for bachelor's students (21,000 or 19 percent of all Erasmus+ bachelor's degree students) that year, France for master's students (20,500 or 26 percent of total Erasmus+ master's students in 2017).

^[5] The total budget available for Erasmus+ from 2021 to 2027 amounts to €26.2 billion, complemented with about €2.2 billion from EU's external instruments. European Commission approved the proposal in 2018, and the European Parliament approved the budget in 2019.

The Erasmus+ slogan 'changing lives, opening minds' is not just a catchy phrase, but is mirrored by the programme's impacts. The Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact Study (2019b) describes how – beyond its educational component – the programme has served as a turning point for five million European students. This includes helping students find their desired job, supporting digital inclusion and boosting a European sense of belonging and cooperation among participating nations. The same study confirmed the findings of Gérard and Sanna (2017), who see international mobility as a key instrument for promoting long-term stability and peace between European countries. This perception among European students participating in international mobility programmes is based on experiences of discovering shared values, identity and culture, and realising what they have to gain by acting cooperatively while building their future together (Gérard and Sanna, 2017).

Although Erasmus+ offers students scholarships to study abroad, in countries such as England, the stipend cannot cover even basic housing needs. This has raised another question examining the social and economic profile of mobile students in Europe. In their research on what drives young people to study abroad, Voin and Gérard (2013) found out that parents' level of education influences students' motivation to study abroad.^[6] Other factors include learning foreign languages, volunteering abroad and having friends in foreign countries. Voin and Gerard (2013) conclude even though the tuition fees in continental Europe may be relatively low compared to the UK, US or Australia, covering the cost of rent and food requires private funding by students. Because of this, Ballatore and Ferede (2013) raise concerns over wealth acting as a barrier to Erasmus+ access, at the risk of helping to create a new European bourgeoisie.

As student mobility has grown, so has demand for international students increased. Universities are keen to attract more international students, whose tuition fees and economic contribution benefit universities and hosting countries – leading to competition between countries to attract more students and capitalise on the rents this can generate.

[6] When a student's father has a PhD, or mother has a bachelor's or master's degree, there is a 20 to 23 percent higher probability for student to study abroad. The same research indicates that in cases when student's mother has a PhD, the probability for student to study abroad is between 36 and 48 percent.

Students who gain skills and knowledge in a host country often play an important role in their home countries after their return – or sometimes even do so while abroad. Young, highly-educated people with international experience often act as agents of change in developing countries, drawing on the knowledge and skills acquired while studying in more advanced economies (Lowell and Findlay, 2001). Yet students' home countries can be disadvantaged when foreign scholarship programmes ultimately motivate young people to emigrate from their home countries on a longer-term basis.

Student mobility in the Western Balkans

This section describes how international student mobility is impacting in the WB region. At the moment, there are almost no structural programmes enabling those studying at WB universities to spend a semester in another country in the region. The exceptions are rare bilateral agreements between universities, which enable a small number of students from specific faculties to engage in intra-regional student exchange. Another exception are universities in Serbia and North Macedonia, two Erasmus+ programme countries, where students from the Western Balkans can spend a semester within the Erasmus+ programme. At the same time, the obstacles towards the student mobility in the region are numerous. Some of the existing visa regimes, most notably the one between Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo, make it almost impossible for this kind of higher education cooperation to take place on a structural level (Beharic et al., 2021).

None of the six WB countries is a member of the EU, making it harder for their young people to move freely within the EU or reside there permanently without a visa. However, since 2015, Erasmus+ has also allowed short-term mobility between EU and other parts of the world, including the WB, for students, researchers, and staff, known as 'International Credit Mobility'. For the first two years of this particular Erasmus+ type of mobility, the budget for the WB made up almost one sixth of the International Credit Mobility budget. This enabled 912 bilateral projects to be set up, facilitating mobility for almost 19,000 students, researchers and staff between 2015 and 2017 (EC, 2018c).

Almost half of these exchanges involved Serbian students (43 percent), followed by Bosnian students (22 percent), Albanian students (18 percent), Kosovar students (10 percent) and Montenegrin students (7 percent). The figures denote not lack of interest among Kosovar and Montenegrin students so much as relative population size and visa liberalisation challenges. The citizens of Kosovo are not even allowed to enter Schengen area without a corresponding visa, despite the fact that Kosovo authorities have fulfilled all the visa liberalization benchmarks. North Macedonia was not included in the statistics as this country is an Erasmus+ 'Programme Country' and thus in the same category as other EU countries. Serbia has officially become a Programme Country within the Erasmus+ Programme in 2019.

This sharp increase in Erasmus+ students was quickly felt within the region. Unlike in Spain, Germany, France and many other EU countries, Erasmus+ Programme in the WB does not have a long tradition. Therefore past generations of students in the region were not offered the experience of spending a semester or two within the EU, as the current generation is today. In WB countries, foreign scholarship programmes are generally advertised as platforms enabling young people to acquire the best education abroad and then to return home after their study exchange period is over.

Students who study abroad are exposed to new and different academic, social and cultural environments where they meet people from all over the world. Many decide to study abroad to gain knowledge, skills and international experience before returning home. However, some decide not to return to their home country after graduating. In the case of the WB, many of those who do return stay only for a short period before leaving their home country again. This is troubling in a region where high youth unemployment, an unstable political environment and corruption are among the reasons why young people decide to emigrate (Mujić and Zaimović-Kurtović, 2017).

Motivation for academic mobility is different for every student. Some students decide to study abroad to enhance and adapt their skills for finding a job in developed countries (Castles and Miller, 2009), while others are determined to study abroad to gain knowledge relevant for the job market in their home countries (IOM, 2008). Youth unemployment in the WB is an important driver of emigration, especially for young people with international experience and foreign university education. In this sense, foreign scholarship programmes may be contributing to the creation of generations of highly educated young people who are inclined to emigrate, instead of staying and working in the WB. Both the brain drain and brain gain are strongly influenced by the international student mobility of local and foreign students (Leitner, 2021).

A research published by the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw) indicates that while Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo suffer from brain drain, certain WB countries show evidence of brain gain (wiiw, 2021). In Serbia, brain gain is associated with foreign students attending Serbian universities. In 2018, almost 5% of all students in Serbia were foreign students, mainly those from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2019).^[7] At the same time, wiiw's analysis finds immigration of the highly educated in North Macedonia to be generally highest among students, recent graduates, and those in their 20s, pointing to brain gain (wiiw, 2021). Even though the same research indicates that Montenegro shows signs of brain gain, the Organization of Montenegrins Studying Abroad (OMSA) recently conducted a research among Montenegrin students and alumni who studied abroad, indicating their strong inclination either to leave the country or to stay abroad. Respondents are not nearly as dissatisfied with the economic situation as they are with the country's social and political issues, stressing them as a decisive push factor (OMSA, 2022).^[8]

^[7] In 2018 in Serbia, 54 percent (or around 6.200) of all foreign students were from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 26 percent (or around 3.000) were from Montenegro, while the remaining foreign students were mainly from Croatia, Libya, North Macedonia, Russia, Slovenia and Greece.

^[8] The research was conducted among 132 respondents, highly qualified young people employed around the world, aged 24 to 40.

Brain drain or brain gain? Students' perspectives

As part of its efforts to strengthen the capacities of Erasmus+ alumni in the region, the EC established the Western Balkans Alumni Association (WBAA), a non-profit and non-governmental organisation targeting students and alumni from the WB. Its aim is to provide a forum which enables the exchange of information and good practices, contributes to evidence-gathering, promotes the Erasmus+ programme and other mobility opportunities, empowers young people and supports them in their pursuit of successful employment (EC, 2018c). Through the assistance of WBAA, the author was able to contact Erasmus+ alumni to interview them about their experiences, perceptions and behaviours.

International student mobility offers multiple benefits both for universities and students. As outlined by Gérard and Sanna (2017), student mobility is good for the higher education sector because it stimulates research and innovation, induces competition between universities, and pressures them to harmonise credit transfer systems and offer courses in a wider range of foreign languages. Students benefit from gaining international experience and learning new skills that they would not be able to acquire while staying in their home country, including soft skills, such as teamwork, responsibility, flexibility, and initiative (Fernandez-Sanz et al., 2017). Students engaging in international mobility programs benefit especially from enhancing their intercultural communications skills, a highly-valuable soft skill for 21st century (Baranova & Kobicheva & Tokareva, 2020). Furthermore, as indicated in the Erasmus Mundus Graduate Impact Survey (2017), studying abroad improves employability, secures better salary and develops transversal skills such as curiosity, tolerance and confidence in recruitment processes. These are important skills for students living in developing countries, including those from the post-socialist and post-conflict societies of the WB, where education systems are widely perceived not to provide the same quality of education as comparable institutions in EU countries. As indicated in the research conducted by the International Institute for Management Development (2021), some of the key factors driving young people to leave are political instability, poor educational system, underdeveloped healthcare infrastructure, low wages, as well as general employee morale and motivation.

Referring to the EC's education programmes, a female student currently pursuing her PhD in Norway, who previously obtained her diploma through an Erasmus Mundus joint master's programme, unequivocally supports young people applying for foreign scholarships and studying abroad, but stresses the need for such programmes within the WB:

'compared to regional standards, EC offers generous scholarships enabling our students to study at some of the best European universities before returning home, but the regional authorities should work in creating such programmes in the Western Balkans, too.'

In addition to generous education schemes funded through various educational programmes, the EU offers significant financial support to PhD students and early stage researchers of a kind that is almost non-existent in the WB. One interviewee described her experience with a Marie Skłodowska-Curie research fellowship in Norway, which provided 'an average salary from a local Norwegian university, plus [an] additional 500 euros for mobility purposes and various other family benefits'. In her view, this 'motivates researchers to come and study at such institutions using these funds'.

Interviewees currently pursuing PhDs in biomedical sciences expressed their doubts over the ability of the Bosnian educational system to motivate and prepare its master's students to pursue PhDs at top European universities. A female student pursuing her PhD in Italy explains she was 'never offered an internship or even a volunteering position within Bosnian institutions because there is almost no cooperation between scientific institutions and industry not only within the region, but also within one single country.'

Such internship opportunities while studying tend to motivate students to achieve better results and even pursue an academic career. In the case of the same female post-graduate student, accessing such an internship while studying abroad motivated her successful application for a PhD position at the same university where she obtained her master's degree.

Given all the benefits of staying abroad, many students and young professionals with international experience struggle to decide whether to return home to the WB or stay and work abroad. Several interviewees noted the strong incentive to study abroad in order to gain knowledge they could not acquire at local universities, and later to use it to improve the socio-economic situation back home. For a female student who studied in the UK and Germany:

'The determining step for my decision to use my knowledge and skills to advance my home society was the very moment I realised where my country stands in relation to the EU and those countries where I have lived and studied.'

With the benefits of their experience, networks and international knowledge, many students hope that it will prove easy to re-engage upon returning to their home countries. As the same student explained:

'Currently, I am seeking ways to direct my aspirations in the most beneficial way. I am certain that connections which all of us bring with are of immense importance. Whereas I find the skills and networks as the prerequisites for engaging in any work, I still believe it is necessary for this potential to be recognised by the relevant stakeholders in our home countries.'

Other interviewees aspired to help their region of origin, but not necessarily from within the region. For example, some aspired to play a role in lobbying for BiH and Kosovo respectively from abroad and using their position to influence international decision-makers. A male student who studied in the US and Hungary, and later served as an intern at the European Parliament, explained that he would like to work for an international organisation such as the European Parliament in order to exert 'a strong political influence from abroad'. Several interviewees raised concerns over the failure of WB politicians, lawmakers and diplomats to foster positive perceptions of the region abroad, and shared similar aspirations to help ameliorate their countries' and the region's declining reputation in the EU and beyond.

One student pointed to the benefits of student exchange programmes in terms of their successful promotion of intra-regional understanding: 'Erasmus+ has created a notion of togetherness within the EU, which is something we are lacking in the region.' A similar point was raised by a female student pursuing her MA in Germany, who argued that higher education institutions should be encouraging politicians in the region to establish exchange programmes that could help them 'boost cooperation in the region, and act jointly toward the EU institutions.'

Not all students go abroad with an aim to return home. Although a minority in this study, several interviewees described the idea of studying abroad not just for experiencing life and learning in a foreign land, but also as a step towards employment in the host country.

Even though many students are eager to start working in their home country after having graduated abroad, they often struggle to find a fulfilling vocation back home. Students who finish their studies with excellent grades and then face difficulties finding a suitable job often find the experience discouraging, and many simply give up. Disappointed by the general political and educational system in the WB, other international students look for ways to stay in their host countries even during their period of study abroad. As a female student explained:

'Studying in England helped me to understand what I would like to do in my life. Since I knew I wouldn't like to work for a state institution in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I started applying for international relations jobs already while studying abroad. I did not have such opportunity anywhere in the region.'

Reasons for not wanting to return home varied from personal to professional, but it was common for students from BiH to raise concerns over high unemployment and the perception that students from abroad are not valued and wanted by the biggest employer in the country: the public administration.

International students are aware that the WB offers scant employment opportunities even for those who remain in the region for their whole lives to study and build networks and connections which are useful in finding a job. Opportunities for highly-qualified young people with foreign diplomas are usually harder to find. However, according to one interviewee, only the private sector is interested in employing young people with foreign diplomas. At present, state institutions are not. However, this could be different if exchange students were graduating within the region as part of a regional exchange programme:

'People who work in state institutions have no interest in employing someone who graduated abroad, speaks foreign languages and knows how to deliver. Domestic political elites have installed their own mediocre party members in public administration, and they want to preserve the status quo in order to keep employing more of them. They see us as competition, and that's the reason why it is so hard to get the job within the state institutions, unless you join the right party. It is not like that in the EU, and it should not be in the region. Erasmus+ for the region will not only give young people good education, but it will also keep them here.'



Conclusion

Overall, mobile students from the WB who studied abroad have a positive attitude towards young people leaving the country and acquiring knowledge at foreign universities in order to use it later in their home countries. Whereas brain drain is a challenge for the WB region, interviewees regard the availability of opportunities for young people to leave the region to gain knowledge, skills and experience as a positive phenomenon – with negative implications for their home countries only if they fail to provide a receptive environment for young people to return to after study abroad.

International student mobility could have more positive benefits for students' home countries if their governments successfully encouraged their highly-educated citizens to come back – for example by recognising the value of education abroad within public sector recruitment processes. During in-depth interviews, respondents criticised ruling politicians for the high youth unemployment rates that discourage young people from returning home, and called on WB governments to ensure the social and economic environment in the region encourages young people who studied abroad to consider returning home, ensuring the circulation of their knowledge, skills and experiences within regional societies and economies.

In the meantime, the WB can profit from its young professionals working abroad via the remittances they send back home, and has good reason to consider how the clear benefits Erasmus+ is believed to have delivered within the EU could be replicated by a similar initiative within the WB countries.

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Our work focuses on building human capital, strengthening a circular economy, and reducing unemployment and out-migration in the Balkan region.



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