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International student mobility and migration in Europe

Guest editorial

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Guest editorial

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- 1 For geographers at universities, student mobility seems to be a phenomenon too close to be studied. Almost everywhere, the number of international students on our corridors has been on the rise, some staying for a term, some for a whole year, many of them for an entire course. Within European academia, the perception is very much focussed upon EU educational programmes designed to foster international mobility within Europe. Funded mobility, however, makes up only a fraction of international student flows. Within the EU-27, around 150,000 students are supported annually by the Erasmus programme ; amongst the 1.228 million¹ students studying in a European country which is not their country of origin, they are a minority of some 12 %. The others are coming on their own, many of them heading for a degree, especially those international students coming from overseas.
- 2 With its level of 6.5 % of international students, the EU appears to be a hot spot of student mobility. On the one hand, that is true. In European universities, there are many opportunities for multilingual and multicultural learning, many more than in other regions of the world. On the other hand, these experiences appear to be limited to the small world that Europe globally is. Half of all foreign students in the EU are from another European country, or, to put it the other way round, 80 % of all mobile students from European countries are studying in another European country. This is the highest share of mobile students remaining within their world region of origin (Van der Pol, 2009).
- 3 Historically, intra-European student mobility and migration is not a new thing. From the early universities of the Middle Ages to World War I, or even World War II, there used to be a high percentage of foreign students, admittedly amongst a much smaller number of students. During the 20th century, the growth and fortification of the nation-state did severely cut down the number of non-national students. In a long perspective, recent growth of mobility in European tertiary education seems to restore old patterns of movement, and adding new avenues at the same time. This is particularly striking in Central and Eastern Europe where the first generation of pioneers went to those Western universities they or their family had cultural ties with, to be followed by a

second and wealthier generation choosing from a much larger market of tertiary education, in Europe or beyond.

- 4 Around the globe, there are around 3 million international students today, up from 2 million 10 years ago, and around 1 million 30 years ago – still making up less than 2 % of all students worldwide. Recent statistics show a total of 2.97 million students studying abroad, and not in their country of origin, out of a total of 158.71 million students enrolled in tertiary education². Obviously, there is a distinct geography of international student flows, with countries and universities receiving a great number of students, and other countries and regions sending many or most of their students abroad.
- 5 In the first decade of the 21st century, not only numbers of students going abroad have been on the rise, but student numbers in general have grown enormously, more or less at the same pace of 6% per annum. As in other markets, tertiary education is becoming a more globalised product and service than it used to be. Global competition has become more intense, and geographical patterns are changing. In 2001, the US have been the largest market for international students, receiving 28 % of all mobile students worldwide, followed by the UK (11 %), Germany (9 %) and France (7 %) as the most important receivers in Europe, followed by Australia, then at 4 %. In 2008, the dominant position of the US has been reduced to 21.1 %, due to an increase in the UK (now at 11.5 %), in France (8.2 %), and other European countries, including some countries losing such as Germany (now at 6.4 %). The most spectacular growth occurred in Australia (now at 7.8 %), New Zealand and Canada, all Anglophone countries actively engaged in globally selling their services of tertiary education.
- 6 The biggest sending region is Asia, including China with 441,000 students abroad, followed by India with 170,000, then Korea with 113,000, all of these with a strong leaning towards North American universities. Within Europe, Asian students are less frequent, except for the UK, and intra-European mobility has been growing, particularly after the opening of Eastern Europe in 1989, with a strong drift from CEE countries to the West, and Western Europeans remaining in the West.
- 7 In general, student migration can be regarded as a special case of international migration, and its 3 million students may be seen as a subset of all 214 million people not living in their country of birth (IOM, 2010, p.115). However you look at it, international students are still a rare species, with 1.9 % of all students studying abroad, compared to 3.1 % of the world's population living abroad. From a global vantage point, students are less mobile than the population in general. But this is only the average, and there are some countries with much higher rates of international students, concentrating in a number of university cities. For these countries and cities, international students have become a factor in economic, social and cultural development, and competition to attract these students has become more intense.
- 8 Traditionally, these data have been compiled and analysed by educational researchers both nationally and worldwide³, looking upon tertiary education as the final and most advanced stage of an individual's educational career. But higher education is at a cross-roads from institutional learning to independent working lives. In the case of international students, this place is taken abroad, and decisions are taken in a new environment that will have many repercussions in their lives, both immediate and long-term.

- 9 For demography and migration research – and it is from this corner that geographers tend to be interested in student migration – studying abroad is regarded a marginal and volatile form of mainly temporary migration. Labour migration is centre-stage in much of the migration literature, and other forms of migration related to it, such as retirement migration or dependents' migration. Only in recent years, data on international students have been added to international migration statistics⁴.
- 10 In this topic issue of *Belgeo*, we are trying to apply a longer-term, biographical approach to international student mobility and migration, combining the higher education end with questions of labour-market entry and performance of the highly-skilled. With this goal in mind, Walter Matznetter and Nina Wolfeil have organised a “Workshop on International Student Mobility and Migration” at the University of Vienna, Austria, in June 2009, bringing together researchers from different disciplines, and practitioners of student mobility institutions. Three of the four contributions here have been presented at this occasion, and rewritten for this topic issue under the scrutiny of *Belgeo*'s editorial board.
- 11 Amongst the following articles, the focus is on different cohorts of academics who have been internationally mobile in the past, or who have settled as international migrants since. But there is a sequence within this mosaic of findings from Europe, North America, and South East Asia. Constanze Engel's interviewees are in their late 20s, up to 5 years after their Erasmus participation. The average age of Nina Wolfeil's respondents is 29.1 years. Johanna Waters has both immigrant students in Canada and returnee graduates in Hong Kong in her sample, the ones in their early 20s, the latter around 30 years old. Linda van Bouwel's European economists with a North American PhD are further advanced in their careers, 41 years being the average in her sample.
- 12 Regarding return rates, there is an enormous variety, from almost everybody going back home in the Erasmus group, to less than a third amongst European economists with an American degree. Shorter periods of studying abroad, without completing a degree, are definitely less conducive to staying abroad. The enormous success of the Erasmus programme, since 1987, and now the Bologna process, has certainly contributed to the emergence of a European system of tertiary education. At the same time, semesters or years abroad have become so common that their market value is boiling down to a standard line in every better-than-average CV (details in Engel, further below).
- 13 On the top end of tertiary education, amongst international postgraduates at elite institutions, return rates are low, and brain drain is high for the country of origin. In contrast to exchange students, degree-seeking students from Poland tend to remain in Germany, Nina Wolfeil reports further below. But cycle and duration of international studies is only one factor impacting upon the decision of the highly-qualified to remain.
- 14 Another dimension is freedom of movement. Over the last decades, many borders have disappeared within the developed world, not only in 1989, and other borders have been built up. The changing geography of migration regimes has affected international student flows, at different times in different ways. For these generations, return migration and transnational working and living arrangements, as they are becoming more widespread in Europe today, were not possible. Innovations in transport and communication are adding fuel to these forms of brain circulation that were not available in the past. In brief: economic growth, but also political changes, such as the

erosion of national systems of education, and technological progress are speeding up the internationalisation of academia.

- 15 Another aspect of student mobility is that the share of international students tends to be larger in the smaller countries, with the greatest number in absolute terms migrating to the largest countries. Within the EU, the largest numbers are in the UK, France and in Germany, but in relative terms international shares are top in Luxemburg (42 %), Cyprus (28 %) and Austria (19 %). Outside Europe, Australia is coming close with almost 21 %. It is in these countries that international students are most intensely felt in everyday life.
- 16 What follows from these generalisations is that the black box of international students has to be taken apart into students at different levels (Bachelor, Master, PhD, postDoc), dividing degree-seekers from those coming for a short term, into intercontinental students and those remaining within their world region, at least. When researching the careers of older cohorts of international students, all the changes that have occurred in educational and migratory regimes over the last decades have to be taken into account.
- 17 The importance of making such distinctions is that different forms of international mobility are having different consequences for further careers and biographies. Access to jobs, access to networks, return rates, cultural habits, partnerships, transnational ways of living, many things can be affected by studying abroad. This is why human geographers should be interested in the growth of international students, because they carry the seeds of globalisation, to paraphrase the term from highly-skilled migration research (cf. Salt, 1988). Many aspects of these implications of having been or having remained abroad are touched upon in the four articles included in this issue.
- 18 Constanze Engel's evaluation of Erasmus mobility upon further careers is the one that focuses most on higher education per se, in this case upon organized international mobility of university students. Due to the funding regulations, her findings are on intra-European mobility only, where growing numbers have contributed to a decline in the perceived value of spending one or two semesters abroad. In a second part of the article, the author introduces another Erasmus programme that is not widely known, that of teaching mobility, started in 1997.
- 19 Nina Wolfeil conducted two types of interviews, one online and standardized with 440 former students at German universities, one face-to-face and qualitative with 27 (former) Polish students staying on in Germany. Typical for intra-European student flows, more than 80 % of the online interviewees had come to Germany as exchange students. Only a minority had come for a degree in the first place, and some exchange students had chosen to stay on, bringing the share of degree students to 26.5 %. By the time of the interview, most of the exchange students had returned to Poland, but only 30 % of the degree students. From the biographical interviews the author develops a four-fold typology according to whether the former student is using its Polish cultural capital or not, and whether s/he continues to be internationally mobile or not.
- 20 In her contribution on Canadian educated students from Hong Kong, Johanna Waters broadens our view of the values of studying abroad. Beyond its academic merits, international students are building up cultural capital that may be more relevant in their working lives than academic knowledge per se. Fluency in a world language, with the right accent, social skills, "Western" dress codes and cultural experience are amongst the skills taken home to Hong Kong, where "mobility capital" (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) can be converted into real money. Surprisingly, it was often academic

failure at entrance exams and thresholds that pushed Hong Kong students to study elsewhere in the first place.

- 21 Linda van Bouwel takes us further up in the hierarchy of academic achievers, looking at the migration behaviour of European students having obtained a PhD in economics in the US. At this level of qualification, return rates tend to be very low, and brain drain seems to be predominant. Given the age of the economists surveyed, 41 years on average, there is little probability that this can be changed for these cohorts. If the EU wants to curb down future emigration of its most advanced students, funds have to be geared towards degree courses at Master and PhD levels, and postDocs.
- 22 All of these four articles have a focus on the micro level, the level of the internationally mobile individual student. This is not the only level at which student and highly-skilled migration should be studied. There is meso level of organisations engaged in attracting international students, or mobilising local students, or facilitating internships and labour market entry. And there is a macro level of brain flows between nations and world regions that needs to be monitored and analysed ; in knowledge-based societies, macro economic repercussions of such flows are becoming ever more important (cf. for Austria Reiner, 2009).
- 23 The editor does hope that these four articles, collected for this topic issue of *Belgeo*, will be a stimulus to further research into international student mobility. The disciplines currently engaged in this research will have to combine and consolidate their knowledge. The true challenges are in the links and the missing links between education at all levels, labour market entry and employment careers, and the living arrangements of highly-skilled migrants, often becoming transmigrants, between two and more places of a globalising world. Global cities with a strong R&D sector will be the most appropriate places to become such hubs of knowledge and information flows.

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NOTES

1. Data for 2008, calculated from UNESCO (2010), table 9.
2. Data for 2008, in UNESCO (2010), p. 170.
3. UNESCO’S GLOBAL EDUCATION DIGEST (2010) is a good example, or Kelo *et al.* (eds.) (2006), Eurodata.
4. Such as the OECD’s 2001 SOPEMI Report on Trends in International Migration, or IOM’s World Migration Report, 5th edition, 2010.

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