

## CROSS-BORDER ROMANIAN STUDENTS MOBILITY IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** *Strategic management and greater policy coherence of Romania's human resources is needed taking into account the interlinkages between demographic, education, labour market and migration flows changes. We focus in this paper on the high need of strengthening incentives for circular and repetitive migration of Romanian students. They represent the most relevant pool of the future-be skilled labour force. Overviewing the realities, it may come to no surprise that Romania has less higher education graduates than in EU. Nor that the expenses for the higher education represent nearly the same amount per capita as in the other EU countries, when adjusted with GDP. Nor that, according to international university rankings, Romanian universities score one of the lowest performance in Europe. Above all, today we risk that our best students migrate to western higher education schools without returning to their home country. A deep analysis of this phenomenon reveals an even harsher reality: the propensity of Romanian students to study abroad is even lower than in other neighbouring countries.*

**Key words:** *international students' migration flows, education policy, university performance, brain drain*

**JEL:** F22, I23, H52, O15

### INTRODUCTION

It may come to no surprise to anyone that Romania has too few higher education graduates. Nor that the expenses for the higher education represent nearly the same amount per capita as in the other EU-25 countries, when adjusted with the GDP. Nor that, according to international university rankings, the Romanian universities score one of the lowest performance in Europe. Furthermore, we risk today that our best students migrate to western higher education schools without returning to their home country. A careful analysis of this phenomenon reveals an even harsher reality: the Romanian students are in no rush

to study abroad. Their propensity to international mobility is lower than those of the neighbouring countries. Furthermore, according to World Bank estimates, a merely 12% of all returning Romanians come back with a university degree, which places us a far behind Bulgaria or other Eastern European countries (Mansoor, Quillin, 2007).

The brain drain is, however, a present phenomenon and it is not too difficult to explain it. *On the one hand*, abroad, gifted young people find themselves in an environment that guarantees high-quality education and internationally recognized degrees. *On the other hand*, such students may be offered good financial

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incentives and, for the most competent among them, the opportunity to advance their career within universities, research institutes or multinational companies. It goes without saying that the receiving country draws great benefits by capitalizing on these foreign talents. If they do not return to their home countries, such countries lose a potential of added value that could help their societies' development. Such added value could be significantly greater than the one created by the rest of the population that does not have access to higher education.

#### KEY POINTS ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' MOBILITY

- **10 countries attract over 75% of world's brain drain** from the 2.6 million students who study in a foreign university.
- **2% of European students undertake their studies in another European country.** In 2004, 16,000 Romanian students, approximately 2.4% of the total Romanian students, were out of the country studying in a European university. We have to keep in mind, however, that the total Romanian student population is significantly smaller compared to other European countries.
- **Romania has too few students and university graduates.** 1 out of 10 Romanians aged over 25 - which is half the European average and one third of the American one - has post-secondary studies.
- **Too few Romanians study in a foreign university:** a little over 1 out of 1000 Romanians, which is 3 times less than Bulgaria.
- **Very few foreigners come to study in our country.** We have 9500

foreign students in public universities and 500 in private schools; half of foreign students in Romania are coming from the Republic of Moldova. However, 1% of all international students choose the Czech Republic or Hungary.

- **No Romanian authority takes any interest in the 23,000 Romanian students who have left the country to study abroad for at least one year (out of which 16,000 study in European countries).** No one seems to want to know what their qualifications are, in what field, how many of them come back or how well integrated they are in the Romanian society. They could make a difference for Romania's scientific and technological progress.
- **World Bank estimates that only 12% of returning Romanians have obtained a university degree abroad.**
- **Stubborn ignorance and complacency come at a great cost** - these estimations are based on OCDE and EUROSTAT statistics, as neither the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth (MERY) nor the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), nor anyone else in this country for that matter, know exactly how many Romanian students study abroad.
- This matter deserves to be dealt with separately as **a key point in Romania's post-accession strategy** emphasizing the need to get as much support as possible in order to:
  - Facilitate Romanian students' access to foreign higher education institutes;
  - Capitalize on Romanian students' foreign university education upon their return home.

## 10 COUNTRIES ATTRACT OVER 75% OF WORLD'S BRAIN DRAIN

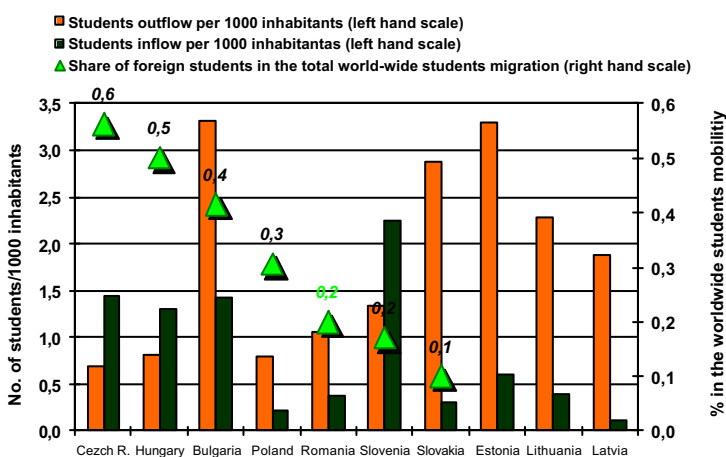
Some might say it is an easy lesson to learn. Yet even developed countries have come to assimilate it relatively late and to various degrees. Over one fifth of the 2.6 million international students worldwide are in the **United States** (22%, on a descending trend compared to previous years). This percentage remains unmatched even by adding up the next two countries' brain drain ratios: the **United Kingdom** and **Germany** (11% and 10% respectively). If we add in **France's** capacity to attract intelligence (9%), **Australia's**, **Canada's**, **Japan's** (4% to 6%), **Russian Federation's**, **Belgium's** and **Spain's** (between 1% and 3%), we come to the conclusion that these 10 countries' high-performance knowledge centres attract over 75% of all migrating brains. Remarkably, there are 17 American universities among the first 20 ranked by the *Shanghai Top 500 World Universities*.

Direct **academia investments** explain, for the biggest part, the differences in higher education quality. In its turn,

performance thus achieved prompts yearly growth of funds allocated to higher education in most countries. However, there are different strategies when it comes to the role of public funds versus private funds in supporting higher education. In Korea, USA or Japan for instance, private investments are greater than public ones. In Austria, Germany, Denmark or Norway private funds play a minor role; what is more, in these countries private resources are used mostly to support pre-school education and significantly less for higher education purposes.

Nevertheless, the **percentage of international students per university** reconfigures the above ranking. Thus, **Australia**, **Switzerland**, **Austria**, **New Zealand**, **Belgium**, the **United Kingdom**, **Germany** and **France** have over 10% of foreign students in their total number of higher education students according to the latest OCDE statistics. Lately, this ranking includes the **Czech Republic** with 4% (more than USA 3.5%), and **Hungary** with 3% of international students.

Figure 1. Students mobility in the Central and East European countries, 2004



Source: Calculations based on OECD Statistics, April 2007

## 2% OF EUROPEAN STUDENTS STUDY IN ANOTHER EUROPEAN COUNTRY

With the Bologna Process, the European Union aims to create a European Higher Education Area which should promote intellectual, cultural and social values together with political and economical dimensions. Students and professors play a central role in this project. EU programs revolve around them providing a large framework of interdisciplinary and region-based cooperation. Results have already started to appear. According to EUROSTAT estimates, in UE-27 the number of young people who study in another European country grows annually by approximately 5%. Up to now, however, this growth has paralleled the general growth in the number of students, which means that the percentage of internationals has remained relatively constant - approximately 2% of the total number of students. The **Cypriots** and the **Luxembourgers** have been of course the most mobile students given the few local universities. Over 10% of **Maltese** students have studied as well in another European country. They are followed by the **Greeks**, the **Irish**, the **Slovaks**, and the **Bulgarians** who are **significantly more mobile than the rest of the Europeans** (6% to 8%). At the other end, the **Polish and the British are the least inclined to study abroad**.

Similarly, **Romanians are in no rush to study in a European higher education school**. If 10 years ago their number was significantly larger than the number of Bulgarian students abroad, today the Romanian students in a European university barely reaches 80% of the number of Bulgarians. Therefore, although our population is more than twice as big, the

number of Bulgarian young people in a European university is bigger than ours by about 4500 students. Moreover, when it comes to registered international students in Romanian universities, we have about 1500 such students less than Bulgaria.

Between 1998 and 2004 Bulgarian students' **mobility multiplication rate** of 4 matched the Slovaks', though indeed bigger than the rate of the new member states: 3 for Romanian students, 2.5 for the Czech and the Polish, and 1.5 for Hungarian students.

## HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO STUDY ABROAD?

In 2004, out of approximately **23,000 Romanians studying abroad**, about 20% were attending universities in **France**, 18% in **Germany**, 14% in **USA**, 13% in **Hungary**, 7% in **Canada**, 5% in **Italy**, 3% in the **United Kingdom**, 2% in **Spain**, **Switzerland**, **Austria**, **Belgium** respectively. Their mobility has been supported mostly through scholarship programs, subsidies and to an insignificant extent through loans. Private funding was very low as well, but it is rapidly becoming a viable source of financial support.

According to the **average annual tuition fees in public colleges and universities** (in US dollars at the purchasing power parity exchange rate, source: OCDE), we can identify at least 6 groups of countries with their corresponding tuition fees:

- a. **Countries without tuition fees:** Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Island, Norway, Slovakia, Sweden;
- b. **150 - 1000 USD:** France, Hungary, Turkey; less than 500 USD: Belgium, Austria, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland;
- c. **1000 - 2000 USD:** United Kingdom, Holland (note: in these countries

there are only private higher education institutions where students get enrolled through government programs);

- d. **2000 - 3000 USD:** New Zealand, Israel;
- e. **3000 - 4000 USD:** Canada, Chile, Australia, Japan, Korea;
- f. **Over 4500 USD:** USA.

In most of these countries the higher tuition fees for international students have ceased to apply to Romanians after Romania's accession to the EU.

### **1% OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS CHOOSE THE CZECH REPUBLIC OR HUNGARY**

The Czech Republic or Hungary has achieved remarkable results through their better quality of higher education systems. Czech universities attract annually 15,000 foreign students, while Hungarian universities about 13,000. This means that 1 out of 100 international students choose a university in one of these two countries. If we take into account European students' mobility solely the ratio becomes 4 students in 100. **Thus, the Czech Republic imports twice as much intelligence as it exports annually, while Hungary 60% more. Bulgaria followed by Poland** is the next in line to attract international students to Central and Eastern Europe.

These countries have higher education institutions present in the Shanghai Top 500, that have succeeded in meeting the high quality education needs of young people from countries like Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine, Serbia and Montenegro, Israel etc. Romania is not mentioned by this ranking. In addition, Romania does not have open universities platforms, with worldwide exposure, that may play a central role in

student promotion, such as the American University in Bulgaria, the Central-European University in Hungary, Jagello University in Poland or Carol University in the Czech Republic.

### **A LITTLE MORE THAN 1 OUT OF 1000 ROMANIANS STUDY ABROAD**

Many question the methodology used by the Shanghai ranking. It is nevertheless difficult to argue with the following statistics that plainly show that:

- Romania has **few higher education graduates** - 1 in 10 Romanians aged over 25, which is half the European average and one third of the American average;
- **Few Romanians leave to study abroad** - a little over 1 in 1000 Romanians, which is 3 times less than Bulgaria;
- **Few international students choose Romania to do their studies** - 1600 from EU-25, about 4500 from the Republic of Moldova, and the rest up to 9500 students from countries like: Israel, Tunisia, Greece, Ukraine, India, Serbia and Montenegro, Albania or Bulgaria.

Romanian students' access to the European Higher Education Area will certainly open new prospects of a solid high education network based on mobility, flexibility, high-quality education and significantly reduced tuition fees that apply beginning this year.

**Who cares?** There is a huge lack of interest towards students who wish to study abroad or those who have a degree from a prestigious foreign university. It is both the fault of Romanian authorities as much as ours, the general public, who choose to focus instead on the latest gossip on politicians.

**Information campaigns on high education programs are insufficient.**

PLOTEUS is a portal supported by the European Commission. It helps students, parents, career counsellors, professors, those who look for employment during their studies, to find information. But even this is not informative enough. The National Office for Foreign Scholarships is the MERY counterpart. They do not provide however detailed presentations of different European education systems. We do not have access to a reliable data base on continuing professional training opportunities available in the European Union.

Despite years of European exchange and scholarship programs and institutional support - Erasmus, Socrates, Tempus, GRUNDTVIG, Transversal, Jean Monet etc. there is still a lack of straightforward information booklets on European travel requirements, living expenses, tuition fees, accommodation, legislation and other useful information for potential applicants. University program transparency is not encouraged nor rigorously applied in the Romanian public area. Yet, neither the objective and efficient selection criteria have found their way into the Romanian educational environment as they should have. Under these circumstances, the right of the Romanian public to freedom of movement can only be guaranteed by providing the necessary information.

**No one is interested to know what happens to students who leave the country to study abroad.** For instance, why aren't we capable to set up a Romanian Students Centre in the Parisian *Cité universitaire* and in all the other major university centres? We are lucky indeed to have passed the lorga law that helped buy the buildings where the *Accademia di Romania di Roma* and the *Istituto romeno di cultura e ricerca*

*umanistica-Venezia* in Venice are located today. For the rest of it, one can only grieve for the fate of the Romanian scholarship student who finds herself or himself without any institutional support and usually becomes a mere entity at the mercy of chaotic circumstances.

**No one is interested to know what happens to Romanians who hold undergraduate or graduate degrees from prestigious universities.** How many of the 23,000 Romanian students abroad return home? Who cares enough to keep a quantitative and qualitative record of the fields they specialize in and of the extent to which these talents are put to good use? Does anyone ever make use of these young people's expertise? I cannot help thinking of the *40 percent unfilled university positions* that we precariously fill today with young PhD-track students whom we do not pay enough but rather rotate or by aggressively piling up teaching hours.

## CONCLUSIONS

The serious absence of reliable statistical data on the volume, type, destination, impact and trends related to education being delivered across borders is discussed. This article argues that the lack of solid information on program and provider mobility creates an undesirable environment of speculation, confusion and often misinformation, which lead to a lower propensity of Romanian students to study abroad. After all, if we want to lure Romanian graduates back home in order to strengthen the Romanian educational and economic system we should start by monitoring them. Please note that our forecasts are based on OCDE statistics for international student mobility and on EUROSTAT statistics for the European

context. And that is because neither the MERY nor the NIS can offer precise information on this topic. Under the circumstances a classification by field of study or education levels would be evidently too much to ask. And yet we incessantly grieve over our brains' exodus. We keep complaining about the severe lack of experts in various fields. In reality, we choose to stubbornly and foolishly ignore those who could make a difference.

Policy debate about how to manage highly-skilled migration in general, students in particular is missing in Romania. The Government rationale for undertaking a commitment to opening up of student migration and to monitor their performance

stands at least on three pillars. First, we must assume that international student mobility has moved from unorganised or self-organised study abroad to a variety of mobility forms organised within national, regional and international programmes. Second, the ways that push and pull factors influence student mobility are based on stimulating motivations in pursuit of academic and professional growth, economic benefit, individual internationalisation, and enhanced social status. Third, student migration has become an issue of economic competitiveness, like attracting best talent, wealth creation and brain drain.

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