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Research Note: Destination cities of European Exchange Students

Abstract

The Erasmus programme is generally considered the flagship of intra-European exchange programmes in higher education, with more than 3 million participants since 1987. Whereas a number of studies investigated the determinants of student mobility decisions, no knowledge exists on the main destination cities of European exchange students. Our research note aims at filling this gap in the academic literature. Making use of a unique dataset from the European Commission containing micro-level data on the full population of Erasmus students for study purposes in 2012-2013 (n = 211,267), we provide a descriptive overview of the spatial distribution of Erasmus students at the city level. The results reveal that European exchange students are mainly attracted by capitals and second tier metropolitan cities. Furthermore, the analysis reveals significant variation regarding the main region of origin of mobile students within most destination countries.

Keywords: Erasmus student mobility; destination choices; cities; spatial distribution; European Union

Introduction

Over the past few decades, international student mobility and migration significantly increased. Whereas in 1975, 0.8 million students were enrolled outside their country of citizenship, this number increased to 4.5 million in 2012 (OECD, 2014). Globally, Europe is the main destination of international students, hosting 48 per cent of all international students (OECD, 2014). In contrast to other world regions, the most common form of student mobility in Europe is credit mobility, whereby students go abroad for a limited period of time in the
framework of an exchange programme (Brooks & Waters, 2011). This is principally the result of the Erasmus programme, the largest European student exchange scheme for higher education students. Since its initiation in 1987, more than three million students have studied in another European country within this framework (European Commission, 2014a). Today, more than 4,000 institutions from over 30 countries participate, and its annual budget exceeds 450 million euro (Souto Otero, Huisman, Beerkens, De Wit, & Vujić, 2013). In sum, these impressive numbers indicate that international students now form an intrinsic part of the ‘new European map of migration’ (King, 2002).

Despite the substantial number of students moving internationally as well as the importance attached to student mobility at a political level (see e.g. Brooks & Waters, 2011; Findlay, 2011; Van Mol, 2014), international student mobility has long been neglected by migration scholars (Findlay, King, Stam, & Ruiz-Gelices, 2006; King & Raghuram, 2013). Consequently, much remains to be done. One of the main lacuna in the emerging literature concerns information on destination cities of exchange students (Insch & Sun, 2013; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008). This is partly due to data limitations. When providing contextual overviews of the Erasmus programme, educational practitioners, politicians and scholars generally rely on the annual statistics published on the website of the European Commission. These statistics cover the main home and host universities as well as Erasmus student flows between countries. In scholarly terms, they allow us to investigate how specific characteristics of higher education institutions and countries explain student mobility flows within Europe (e.g. Rodríguez González, Bustillo Mesanza, & Mariel, 2011). Data on the main destination cities of Erasmus students, however, is non-existent today.

Gaining insight into the spatial distribution of Erasmus student mobility at the city level, is relevant for advancing our understanding of the mobility decision process of exchange students. In the literature on international migration it is suggested that people are
attracted by countries rather than by particular localities, as individuals generally move to localities where there are job opportunities (e.g. Geis, Uebelmesser, & Werding, 2013; Hofmann, 2015; Moral-Pajares & Jimenez-Jimenez, 2014; Palmer & Pytliková, 2015). Nevertheless, we argue this might not hold true for exchange students. After all, it has been amply demonstrated that Erasmus students are mainly motivated by experiential instead of academic goals (e.g. Findlay et al., 2006; Teichler, 2004; Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). Analyses at the macro-level seems to confirm this trend, revealing that Erasmus student mobility is biased towards Mediterranean countries, which would be attractive because of their climate (Rodríguez González et al., 2011). We expect that besides the characteristics of host institutions and countries, students also consider characteristics of host cities when making mobility decisions. After all, the host city is the physical environment where the educational experience will take place (Cubillo, Sánchez, & Cerviño, 2006). Descriptive information on the main destination cities of Erasmus students might thus stimulate future research, opening possibilities to broaden existing frameworks explaining student mobility flows by institutional and country-level factors (e.g. Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), by adding a crucial intermediate context in the decision-making process, namely the destination city. In addition, such descriptive information is helpful for researchers empirically investigating the dynamics of intra-European student exchanges, as it allows us to situate particular fieldwork settings within the broader European context. With this research note, we provide a such descriptive overview, focusing on the general attractiveness of destination cities of Erasmus students as well as the relative popularity of each city according to the students’ region of origin.

Data and methods
Our analysis is based on micro-level data from the European Commission, covering the full population of Erasmus students in the 2012-2013 academic year by both institution of destination and of origin (European Commission, 2014b). Our overview is restricted to student exchanges for study purposes ($n = 211,267$), as student mobility for work placements might follow different patterns. For each destination institution, we mapped the spatial location. Thereafter, we aggregated incoming student numbers for institutions located in the same city. Some of the localities were very small towns located in the immediate environment of (very) large cities. As we expected students going to these small locations are mainly attracted by these nearby larger cities instead of the small locality, we aggregated them with the larger cities if the distance between both localities was less than ten kilometers.

The relative popularity of each city according to students’ region of origin in each city is calculated as the highest ratio between the actual percentage of Erasmus students from a region of origin in that city and the expected percentage of Erasmus students from that region. This expected percentage is calculated as if all students by region of origin would be distributed equally over all cities. The expected distribution differs per country as Erasmus students are not eligible for an exchange in their own country of origin.

**Findings**

Figure 1 shows that students go to a great variety of destinations, 884 locations in total. The top-20 destinations of Erasmus students are (in descending order): Madrid (6,697 students), Paris (6,423), Barcelona (3,801), Lisbon (3,693), Valencia (3,434), Istanbul (3,395), Berlin (3,230), Prague (2,949), Vienna (2,689), London (2,616), Budapest (2,522), Rome (2,508), Milan (2,388), Warsaw (2,108), Seville (2,079), Stockholm (1,979), Granada (1,960), Lyon (1,928), Dublin (1,901), and Copenhagen (1,901). An overview of the fifty most popular cities can be consulted in annex 1.
Figure 2 shows only cities receiving at least 250 Erasmus students, and indicates the capitals and second tier metropolitan regions (as defined in ESPON, 2013), as well as the cities hosting a world class higher education institution (defined as institutions included in the top-50 of the Times Higher Education Ranking and/or Shanghai Ranking for 2013).

Furthermore, the figure indicates the relative popularity of each city according to students’ regions of origin. This figure clearly illustrates that students are mainly attracted by larger European cities, instead of being attracted by the best universities. Only five of the twenty most popular locations (Copenhagen, London, Munich, Paris and Stockholm) host a world-class university. This suggests that international and large cities might have a larger appeal to Erasmus students instead of the prestige of the academic institution they will attend.

Furthermore, the figure indicates interesting patterns regarding the region of origin of European exchange students. Students from Northern Europe are overrepresented in most cities hosting a world-class institution for higher education, but are nowhere the most overrepresented group in Eastern or Southern European cities – with the exception of Prague. Southern European students, in contrast, are shown to be mainly overrepresented in other Southern European cities, as well as in Polish and Lithuanian cities. The overrepresentation of Eastern and Western European students, in contrast, shows to be more spatially dispersed. Overall, the figure reveals considerable variation in the regions of origin of incoming students within most cities.
Finally, we investigated bilateral flows between cities. The analysis reveals an impressive number of 34,747 different bilateral flows. As can be observed in table 1, the 20 most prominent flows are all directed towards capital cities, with the exception of the student mobility flow between Barcelona and Milan, two major second tier cities. Interestingly, however, these 20 most populated flows only cover 2.9 per cent of all Erasmus students in the 2012-2013 academic year. When we compare this number with the relative share of the most popular destination cities, we notice that 28 per cent of all Erasmus students head towards the 20 most popular destinations, and 43.9 per cent to the top-50. So whereas exchange students appear to predominantly cluster in European capitals and second tier cities, the results suggest there is substantial variety in terms of cities of origin.

Discussion

Although destination city characteristics probably play a crucial factor for explaining student mobility patterns within Europe, they have been largely neglected in the academic literature. With this research note, we aimed to take a first step in improving our understanding on the (uneven) distribution of Erasmus students across destination cities. Based on a unique dataset covering the full population of Erasmus students in 2012-2013, we showed that European exchange students head to a wide diversity of destinations. Nevertheless, capitals and large metropolitan regions are clearly more attractive than smaller localities, as a significant share of Erasmus exchange students head towards European capitals or second tier metropolitan cities. However, when considering the major bilateral flows, it can be observed that only about 3 per cent of Erasmus students move within the 20 most prominent flows, which cover ten European capitals, as well as Barcelona and Milan. This suggests intra-European credit
student mobility is characterised by a pyramid-shape, whereby students move from a wide
diversity of origins towards a select number of main (large) destination cities. Furthermore, we
revealed intriguing patterns regarding the zones of origin of exchange students across and
within destination countries. The results suggest, for example, that the status of higher
education institutions might be most important for Northern European students, as these
students are overrepresented in cities hosting a world-class institution for higher education. In
addition, students from Southern Europe seem to mainly move within their own region, as
well as towards Eastern Europe. This pattern might be related to similarities between
localities in terms of costs of living, culture and/or climate.

In sum, although presented results in this research note are descriptive, they show it is
imperative to take the city level into account in future empirical research into international
student mobility. In this research note, for example, we are not yet able to grasp the relative
share of Erasmus students on the total student population in each city, as this requires
compiling additional statistical information on the total student population in the 1,018
destination cities covered by the database. Nevertheless, such analysis would be highly
relevant for grasping which cities dispose of the most diversified student populations (for an
example on degree mobile students in the Netherlands, see Pellenbarg & Van Steen, 2015),
which on its turn may significantly affect student’s local experiences. Future studies should
also investigate which specific characteristics make some cities more attractive than others,
taking the students’ country of origin into account. Possible foci are cities’ labour market
characteristics, as well as the specific amenities cities provide in terms of, for example,
transport infrastructure, costs of living, social cohesion, recreation areas and nightlife (for an
example on internal labour migration within Germany, see Buch, Hamann, Niebuhr, &
Rossen, 2014).
From a theoretical viewpoint, it should be noted that future in-depth studies on the spatialities of student mobility might yield great potential in terms of confirming, falsifying and/or advancing classical and contemporary migration theories. When comparing the described properties of Erasmus student mobility flows, for example, with classical migration theories such as Ravenstein’s migration laws (Ravenstein, 1885), particular similarities can be detected. For example, most Erasmus students are female (European Commission, 2014a), each mobility from one locality to another has a compensating counter-current, and Erasmus students mainly move to larger cities. Nevertheless, much more can be done with the dataset at hand. A more detailed analysis would allow, for example, to explore whether students are also more likely to move short distances, and whether those from large towns are proportionally less mobile compared to students from smaller towns. Furthermore, in-depth analyses of student mobility spatialities can also inform contemporary migration theories. For example, the interplay between talent workers, including students, and cities is becoming increasingly important for remaining competitive among global knowledge economies (Florida, 2002). After all, ‘a large and constant supply of talented people is required’ for enhancing a high rate of innovation (Hansen & Niedosmyl, 2009: 192). Future studies can investigate, for example, whether international students indeed move to the most innovative cities by incorporating indicators on the innovativeness of destination cities.

In conclusion, more developed insights into the decision-making process of exchange students and the importance of cities will not only feed academic research and theory-building, but will also be very informative for educational practitioners, local administrations and policy-makers.

References


