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Why is it so hard? And for whom? Obstacles to intra-European mobility

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Abstract

Even though intra-European youth mobility is valued as a boost for personal and professional development, few opt for it. While obstacles preventing young people to become mobile have been discussed broadly, less attention has been paid to the obstacles for the youth who are already on the move. We offer this rare perspective in regard to intra-European mobility. We focus on youth in four types: pupil mobility, vocational (education and training) mobility, higher education student (degree and credit) mobility and employment mobility, in six countries: Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, Norway, Romania and Spain. Our analysis, based on qualitative (140 interviews) and quantitative (N=1.682) data, reveals that the perceived obstacles vary between the mobility types, with the greatest divergence between the educational and work-related mobilities. Obstacles such as lack of financial resources and guidance, the perceived incompatibility of institutional regulations within Europe, are shared by all mobile youth.

Keywords: mobility; youth; obstacles; qualitative methods; quantitative methods; correspondence analysis; Europe.

Introduction

The intra-European mobility¹ of people is one of the “four freedoms” in the EU and its ancestors (Treaty of Rome, 1957). However, “in 2015, a little under 11.3 million EU-28 citizens (...) of working age (20–64) were residing in a Member State other than their country of citizenship” (Fries-Tersch et al., 2017: 23), corresponding to 2.2% of all EU citizens (own calculation based on data from Eurostat news release 124/201 from 10 July 2015). This number seems to be modest in the light of the meaning the EU attributes to the intra-European mobility of young people: lifelong learning, European identity, social cohesion and labour market participation (Karl & Kmiotek-Meier, 2015).

Intra-European youth mobility is seen as an all-purpose medicine to the challenges faced by the EU: “[M]obility should be seen not as an end in itself, but as a preferred means of strengthening European citizenship and competitiveness, expanding and enriching the training and experience of young people, enhancing their versatility and employability and developing their intercultural understanding through language skills and exposure to other cultures” (EU, 2008). A mobility experience abroad is taken as a proxy for openness towards the world, creativity and robustness (Di

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¹ For the discussion on the use of “mobility” and “migration” see e.g. Cohen and Sirkeci (2011).



Pietro, 2013). “Current migration, education and social policy often encourages and facilitates youth transnational mobility. This occurs under the expectation that mobility will not only provide individual youth with enhanced life chances, but benefit local and national communities and economies more broadly” (Robertson et al., 2017: 204). However, despite many advantages of a stay abroad and an increase over the last decade in the number of programmes and funding schemes in the EU to boost the intra-European youth mobility, young people are still reluctant and/or hindered to move, whether for education, training or work purposes.

Obstacles are not only encountered by those who stay at home. Those who become mobile may account hindrances related to their stay abroad as well. The focus on obstacles among realised mobilities is particularly important as it shows the drawbacks of mobility. It would be, however, too simplistic to assume, that all young mobile people face the same challenges. The comparison between mobility types has been neglected in literature (but for a theoretical view, see King et al., 2016; on programmes, see Dvir & Yemini, 2017). The aim of this contribution is to show how perceived obstacles differ among the four mobility types in focus.

For the purpose of this paper, we define an *obstacle* as an aspect (such as a person, thing, idea, place or institution, etc.) that prevents the mobility of young people from becoming a beneficial experience and prevents young people to achieve their intended mobility goals. We define *mobility* as a movement which is based on a stay in a country “that is foreign to the home country” (Cohen & Sirkeci, 2011: 7) and which comprises mobility experience other than in the context of a holiday and/or family visit, with a minimum length of two weeks.

We apply a multi-methods design comprising two data sources: a quantitative online survey and qualitative interviews with mobile youth, carried out among six European countries (Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, Norway, Romania, Spain). The combination of qualitative and quantitative findings, as well as wide country coverage, are rarely seen in migration and mobility studies. By using both data sources in an explorative manner (without the claim for representative results) and complementing them as equal sources of inquiry, we can offer an in-depth picture of obstacles to intra-European youth mobility.

We begin by introducing the debates on obstacles to mobility. Then, we describe the methodology and the consecutive stages of data analysis. The subsequent section presents the findings regarding mobility types and perceived obstacles. This is followed by a discussion and an outlook on further research.

Perceived obstacles for mobility – some reflections

Literature coverage regarding obstacles among various mobility types is uneven: while student mobility is well researched (Abdullah et al., 2014; King et al., 2016), vocational education and training (VET) mobility is understudied. Also employment mobility is less covered as the focus lies rather on labour migration. In terms of pupil mobility: while the structural conditions are covered well there are few contributions presenting mobile pupils’ voice. This short overview draws mainly on studies on higher education (HE) student mobility and pupil mobility, but the named obstacles might be relevant also for other mobility types.

The first field of obstacles tackled in the literature regards hindrances on the individual level, that either hinder from going abroad or from having a “good mobility”. One of the main hindrances relates to *financial resources*. The costs – legal charges, fees, accommodation expenses, etc. – of international mobility during secondary education can be high. In this case, due to limited external funding, these costs are often predominantly borne by parents (Banov et al., 2017; Ruffino & Hardt, 2001). In the field of HE, the lower *the socio-economical background*, the less the willingness to



enrol in tertiary education abroad due to the perceived additional financial burden (Grabher et al., 2014; Hauschildt et al., 2015).

Lack of cultural capital – here especially *linguistic skills* – rank top in regard to obstacles before and during mobility. Studying and working in English in a country with different official language(s) demands increased language effort in order to integrate: those without national language proficiency of the hosting country are more vulnerable (Cundal & Seaman, 2012). Furthermore, HE students may seek educational opportunities in countries where the language is familiar to them (Chankseliani, 2016; Kmiotek-Meier & Karl, 2017), and thus other potential destinations are overlooked. Some countries appear less attractive as hosts for international HE students since their national languages are comparatively more difficult to learn but are essential for pursuing a career in the receiving country (Molodikova, 2013).

Social capital also plays a central role for understanding perceived obstacles before and during mobility. For many, moving away from *social relationships* like family, partners, children or friends is not easy to handle (Brandenburg, 2014; Cairns, 2012; Grabher et al., 2014; Hauschildt et al., 2015; Souto-Otero et al., 2013). This becomes even more of a challenge if a social network is not yet established in the destination country as the research on mobile HE students shows (Growiec, 2010; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014).

A further important field of obstacles found in the literature is *institutional* in nature and involves issues such as access to information, organizational and state regulations. As research indicates, sufficient and accessible information is not systematically provided in HE student mobility (Brandenburg, 2014; Grabher et al., 2014; Hauschildt et al., 2015; Lörz et al., 2016); the transferability of degrees and finding employment after an academic stay abroad may be also problematic (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017; Wiers-Jensen & Try, 2005). Young people in foreign institutions have to deal with a curriculum content that is often incompatible with the one at home (Brandenburg, 2014; Souto-Otero et al., 2013). Additionally, mobile HE students are exposed to different academic cultures or mobile pupils are exposed to different teaching methods, thus hindering them from integrating in and benefiting from the host country (Elliot et al., 2016; Gu et al., 2010; Teichler & Steube, 1991).

Based on this short overview some obstacles before and during mobility can be identified across mobility types: both mobile pupils and HE students are affected mostly by economic, cultural and social related and/or institutional induced obstacles. More findings from the previous literature will be discussed later, against the backdrop of our findings.

Methodology: Data and Methods

In order to examine the interlinkage of mobility types with obstacles, we use both quantitative online survey data (N=1.682) and qualitative data from interviews with mobile youth (140 interviews), focussing on the perceived obstacles to mobility before and during the stay abroad (see Table 1 for country coverage and number of cases). Both data sources, the survey and the interviews, are used to map the obstacles in regard to different mobility types in a comprehensive way. Whereas quantitative data depict the tendencies and regularities in the mobile worlds of young people, the qualitative data source enriches quantitative facts with knowledge on personal interpretations and argumentations. Additionally, while our quantitative findings do not allow to differentiate between obstacles encountered before and during mobility, qualitative data enable such differentiation.



The data were collected in the MOVE² project. The age of the respondents was between 18 and 29. All mobilities in focus were intra-European (i.e. the EU plus Norway); data were collected during or after the mobility.

Table 1: Sample overview

Nr	Mobility type	Qualitative data - numbers by type and by country ³			Quantitative data - numbers for all mobility types (Nr 1-4) by country
1	HE student mobility	Luxembourg	18	Hungary	25
2	pupil mobility	Norway	15	Hungary	19
3	VET mobility	Spain	17	Germany	16
4	employment mobility	Norway	15	Luxembourg	15
TOTAL					140 interviews
					N = 1.682

Quantitative data and methods

In the survey⁴, the mobility experience was defined as a stay abroad other than in the context of a holiday and/or family visit and was set at a minimum of two weeks. Collection of the quantitative data occurred between November 2016 and January 2017. This paper only uses the responses of mobile young people, who cited pupil mobility, HE student mobility (credit or degree)⁵, VET mobility (for educational or practical reasons) or employment mobility⁶ as a reason for their stay abroad. The survey addressed the mobility obstacles with one question: “Generally speaking, which obstacles do you face/have you faced in spending time/moving abroad?” with eleven⁷ different options (see Table 2), from which a maximum of three could be chosen.

To visualise the interrelationships between obstacles and the mobility type in the quantitative data, we performed a correspondence analysis (using SPSS25) to explore relations between sets of variables. In the correspondence analysis “[a]ttention is focused on the interrelations among all the variables without regard to such distinctions as dependent versus independent variables” (Weller & Romney, 1990: 7). This method facilitates reflections on the structure of the data distribution (Backhaus, 2003; Bühl, 2012). The correspondence analysis is based on the contingency Table 2.

² MOVE has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 649263.

³ The allocation of mobility types to respective countries resulted from logic of the project MOVE and was based on a contrast principle in which two mobility types were researched in depth in two different countries (such as high numbers of outgoing students from Luxembourg and low student mobility from Hungary).

⁴ For dataset see: Navarrete, L; Lorenzo-Rodríguez, J.; Díaz-Chorne, L; Sanz-Lledó, V; Fernández, V.; Pallarés, E. and Díaz-Catalán, C. (2017): Mapping mobility - pathways, institutions and structural effects of youth mobility. Survey MOVE_SD3. [online] Madrid: Ilustre Colegio Nacional de Doctores y Licenciados en Ciencias Políticas y Sociología.

⁵ Degree students pursue the whole cycle (Bachelor and/or Master and/or PhD) of their studies abroad. Credit students complete only a part of their studies abroad, receiving the diploma from their home university.

⁶ The questionnaire asked about the five most relevant mobility experiences. Only those with distinct mobility experiences formed part of the analysis; for instance, the ‘higher education degree’ type was designated only to those who had between one and five higher education degree experiences and no other experiences abroad. We decided to exclude mixed types (that is, those having e.g. both pupil and higher education mobility experiences) in order for us to obtain a distinctive picture of obstacles by mobility type.

⁷ Additionally, respondents could choose the twelfth option, ‘I have not encountered any obstacles’, which could not be combined with the other items.



Table 2: Obstacles by mobility types

Mobility type		Lack of sufficient language skills (<i>lack_language</i>)	Lack of support or information (<i>supp_inf</i>)	Difficulties registering in education/training (<i>register</i>)	Obstacles or differences in recognition of qualifications (<i>recognition</i>)	Difficulties finding a job abroad (<i>job</i>)	Difficulties obtaining a work permit abroad (<i>permit</i>)	A worse welfare system (pensions/healthcare) (<i>welfare</i>)	My partner is not willing to move (<i>partner</i>)	Psychological well-being (fear of suffering from stress/ loneliness/ sadness)	Financial commitments in my current place of residency (e.g. bank loans or owning a property) (<i>fin_commitment</i>)	Lack of financial resources to move abroad (<i>lack_finances</i>)	N by type
Pupil	N	95	73	27	34	28	16	17	32	51	16	85	219
	%	43.4%	33.3%	12.3%	15.5%	12.8%	7.3%	7.8%	14.6%	23.3%	7.3%	38.8%	
VET educational	N	50	38	16	18	17	10	12	17	38	13	28	129
	%	38.8%	29.5%	12.4%	14.0%	13.2%	7.8%	9.3%	13.2%	29.5%	10.1%	21.7%	
VET practical	N	88	62	13	20	24	10	17	11	37	20	52	180
	%	48.9%	34.4%	7.2%	11.1%	13.3%	5.6%	9.4%	6.1%	20.6%	11.1%	28.9%	
HE credit	N	235	214	88	149	58	23	44	53	204	47	263	641
	%	36.7%	33.4%	13.7%	23.2%	9.0%	3.6%	6.9%	8.3%	31.8%	7.3%	41.0%	
HE degree	N	48	66	51	45	14	6	29	17	77	25	41	207
	%	23.2%	31.9%	24.6%	21.7%	6.8%	2.9%	14.0%	8.2%	37.2%	12.1%	19.8%	
Employment	N	172	74	23	51	91	33	31	41	93	25	92	306
	%	56.2%	24.2%	7.5%	16.7%	29.7%	10.8%	10.1%	13.4%	30.4%	8.2%	30.1%	
TOTAL	N	688	527	218	317	232	98	150	171	500	146	561	1682
	%	40.9%	31.3%	13.0%	18.8%	13.8%	5.8%	8.9%	10.2%	29.7%	8.7%	33.4%	100.0%

Notes: (1) Variable names indicated in correspondence analysis are in brackets. (2) Multiple choice answer, with a maximum of three categories to be chosen; % relates to the percentage of people in the respective mobility type. (3) Top three obstacles per mobility type in bold.

Qualitative data and methods

The data collection took place between January and December 2016, with the interviews being recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymised. For the interviews a semi-structured interview guide was used, with two questions aimed directly at obstacles to mobility: “What were hindering factors/obstacles for you in going/being abroad?” and “What are the biggest challenges to becoming/being mobile?”.

The qualitative data analysis has been based on initial coding in Grounded Theory Methodology (Charmaz, 2006). In a first step, an open coding was carried out with which the specifics of respective mobility fields could be taken into consideration. In a second step, findings regarding obstacles were categorised (in the respective mobility types and countries) as *before* and *during* mobility, and sub-categorised as *financial*, *organizational*, *personal*, *country characteristics* or *other*, resulting in ten categories (‘before/financial’, for instance). Finally, meta-analysis based on the information from the different mobility types and countries was carried out.

Findings⁸

In a first step quantitative and qualitative results will be presented separately. In a second step we interlink the obstacles named in the survey with the obstacles named in the qualitative interviews to give a general picture on the obstacles to mobility in the conclusion part.

⁸ Due to space limitations, a qualitative example cannot be given for every finding, even if quotations exist. Thus, the qualitative material is summary in form. Only the main quantitative findings are discussed in the paper as well.



Findings in survey

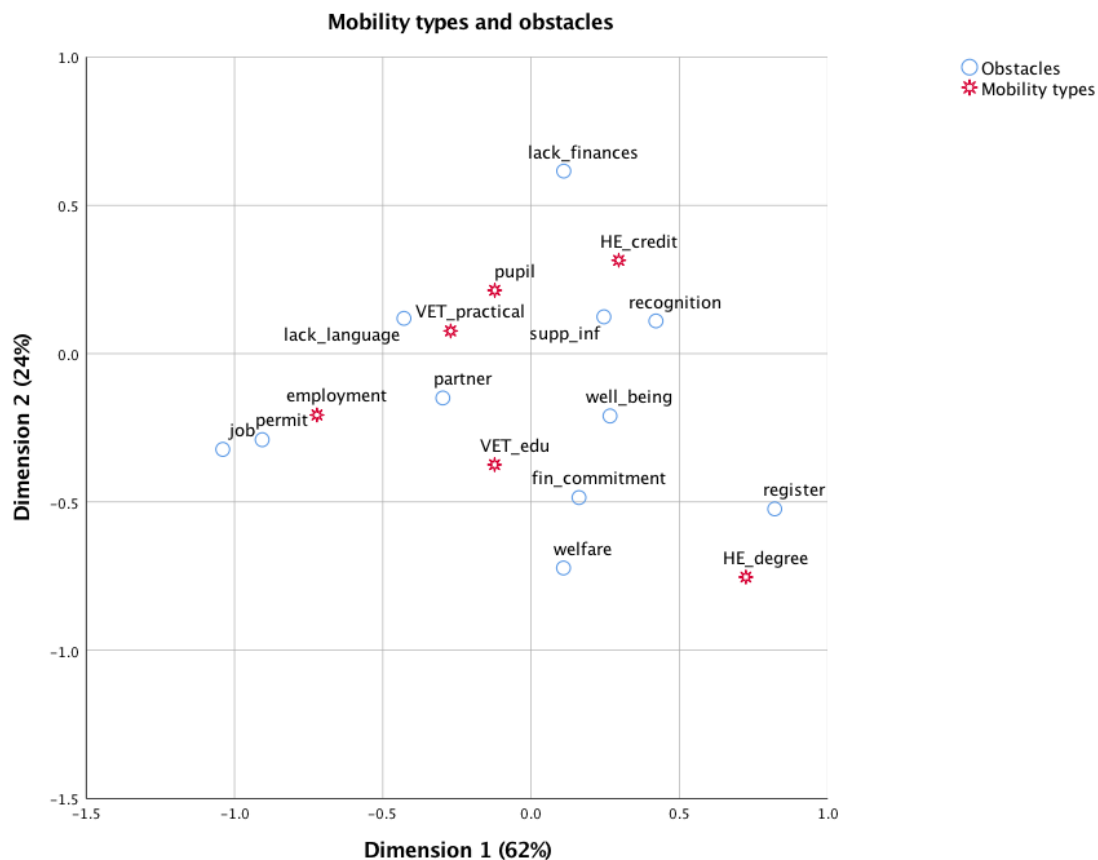
Only 22.6% of survey participants with a mobility experience state that they have not experienced any mobility related obstacles. This ratio varies across mobility types, from 35.7% for VET educational mobilities to 14.0% for those moving abroad for work, showing first differences between mobility types. ‘Lack of sufficient language skills’ (40.9%), ‘Lack of financial resources to move abroad’ (33.4%) and ‘Lack of support or information’ (31.3%) are the most frequent obstacles cited by those (of all mobility types together) in the survey who name at least one obstacle (see Table 2).

‘Psychological well-being (fear of suffering from stress/loneliness/sadness)’ is ranked among the top three obstacles in the survey among HE degree student, vocational (part of education) and employment mobility, while this ranks fourth for other mobility types. Only degree mobile students have ‘difficulties registering education/training’ (24.6%), while mobile workers name ‘difficulties finding a job abroad’ (29.7%) as one of the main obstacles. The data further indicate that all mobility types encounter similar obstacles, but to a different degree; for example, ‘Lack of sufficient language skills’ is a problem for 56.2% of mobile employees but for only 23.2% of degree mobile students (see Table 2).

The results of the correspondence analysis indicate a data structure in a triangle form distributed along two dimensions (see Figure 1). The triangle’s vertices are represented by HE degree mobility, employment mobility and HE credit mobility. Those mobility types are extreme types in regard to the mobility obstacles they relate to; the greater distance of HE degree mobility from other mobility types and the obstacles in general indicate that this mobility type encounters fewer obstacles than the other mobility types.

The first dimension (Dimension 1) along which the mobility types and obstacles are placed explains 62% of the variance. It runs along the line between *HE degree mobility* (see Figure 1 on the right, positive values) and *employment mobility* (see Figure 1 on the left, negative values) with VET (both types) and pupil mobility in the middle area, but closer to employment mobility. This dimension relates to different settings for different mobility types, with the educational ones (pupil, HE student and VET mobility) strongly affected by institutional regulations. Hence, educational mobilities seem to be embedded in and framed by their respective institutional setting, following the ‘rhythm’ of the institution, for example the application process which is governed by deadlines such as school years, terms or semester that may be incompatible with other countries (Carlson, 2013). Those hindrances are reflected in the correspondence analysis with obstacles such as ‘Difficulties registering in education/training’, ‘Obstacles or differences in recognition of qualifications’ and ‘Lack of support or information’ located on the right of the graph. As stated in the literature, previous educational achievements may go unrecognised in other countries (Grabher et al., 2014; Tanyas, 2012) or a lengthy and sometimes costly process may be required to achieve recognition (Wulz & Rainer, 2015). Additionally, targeted and accessible information is often lacking (Brandenburg, 2014; Grabher et al., 2014; Lörz et al., 2016), general administrative rules are often missing (Gibbons & Telhaj, 2011) and the application process can be demanding and stressful (Eichhorst et al., 2013; Pimentel Bótas & Huisman, 2013).



Figure 1: Correspondence Analysis: Mobility types and obstacles⁹

Note: correlation analysis based on symmetrical normalisation; percentages indicate the amount of the explained variance per respective dimension

Work-related mobilities are affected by ‘Difficulties finding a job abroad’ or ‘Difficulties obtaining a work permit abroad’, the latter item points to institutional constraints. The finding regarding ‘Difficulties obtaining a work permit abroad’ is puzzling, as the mobilities analysed are intra-EU mobilities (plus Norway – member of European Economic Area), which do not require work permits due to the right to free movement and work in other EU countries. Our quantitative results indicate (perceived) systemic differences between Member States despite the single market and free movement of labour in the EU. Difficulties in finding adequate jobs that match young peoples’ skills may lead to de-skilling of qualifications, i.e. taking jobs below the obtained degree and certifications (Cook et al., 2011; Kovacheva, 2014; Pemberton & Scullion, 2013), or may force people to change their specialisation in the new country (Csedő, 2008) in the longer run.

The second correspondence analysis dimension (see Figure 1, Dimension 2) explains 24% of the variance and is dominated by the difference between HE credit and degree mobility and the

⁹ Further outputs of the correspondence analysis can be requested from the corresponding author.



difference between responses on ‘A worse welfare system (pensions/healthcare)’ and ‘Lack of financial resources to move abroad’. Especially the closeness between HE credit mobility and ‘Lack of financial resources’ may indicate that scholarships such as Erasmus+, for example, do not necessarily cover all expenses, which thus require further private funding (Molodikova, 2013; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). In regard to HE credit mobility, a stay abroad is often seen as a prolongation of studies, resulting in an additional financial strain (Lörz et al., 2016). Furthermore, the closeness between HE degree mobility and the welfare dimension indicates that for the long stayer the circumstances in the country of destination matter.

Interestingly, the item ‘Lack of sufficient language skills’ is placed closer to employment, pupil and VET mobilities than to HE student mobilities. It seems that the language deficits claimed in regard to international mobile students (Teichler & Steube, 1991) have diminished over the years or are smaller compared to other mobility types.

Findings in interviews

Since in the quantitative part it was not possible to distinguish between obstacles taking place before and during mobility due to the question’s wording, these nuances were the focus of the interview analysis. The qualitative data allow us to consider the level of individual experiences and reflections on obstacles and leave the definition of the latter to the young people.

Obstacles before mobility

As the narrations show, obstacles experienced before going abroad concern different levels, reaching from perceived institutional/structural constraints to restrictions regarding agentic latitudes and individual resources.

On the structural-procedural level, similarly to the survey’s results, mobile pupils from Hungary, VET students from Spain and HE students in general often name complicated, time-consuming, unsystematic and non-transparent procedures as obstacles to mobility in the interviews. Here, young people depend on institutional procedures; for example, the information flow via gatekeepers (e.g. teachers, tutors, support) as shown in the following quotation:

“In summer we got to know that we were accepted. Then, only months later, we got the documents to register. Because we didn’t know when we should be there, when the courses start, we didn’t book the flight (...) and then the flight was really expensive and we had little time to prepare everything. (...) It would have been much better if they [the universities] have started much earlier with the registration process.” (Gabrielle, HE credit student mobility from Luxembourg to France)¹⁰

However, this is not the case for Norwegian pupils and German VET, since in the first setting exchanges are often organised in the context of school cooperation, with the necessary information provided by the school or the teacher; and in the second setting the procedures are highly standardised and largely facilitated by mobility advisors. Nevertheless, our findings confirm insufficient information flows also in these mobility fields (Ruffino & Hardt, 2001).

Another structural restraint refers to the scopes of freedom in choices: In HE, credit mobile students often depend on bilateral agreements between institutions while deciding on a destination abroad, which restricts choices. This is also often the case with pupil exchanges in Norway:

¹⁰ The respective interview quotes were translated by the respective research team.



“Originally, I wanted to go maybe to Germany or England or the US. But the program that arranged my exchange they only had a program with France. (...) For this specific program, this was the only option.” (Elsa, pupil mobility from Norway to France)

This is less so for HE degree students, who depend instead on national regulations regarding admission to institutions and accreditation of diploma in the home country afterwards. For the VET field, the interplay of predefined structures and agentic latitudes appears similarly complex and context-dependent: VET students from Spain, on one hand, cite a lack of institutional support, stating that the administrative effort is too great to deal with alone. For VET students from Germany, on the other hand, the highly structured mobility process considerably simplifies going abroad; however, choices are limited due to structural and institutional restrictions.

Furthermore, the interviews thematise the financial issue in combination with the length of a stay abroad. The shorter the stay abroad, the less funding is required, a result reflected especially by VET mobility interviews. While apprentices from Germany leave for around three weeks and do not indicate any funding difficulties, those from Spain leaving for many months report financial hardships, and often have to work additionally during their mobility, resulting in less time for social integration or learning the language. A similar phenomenon has been described in regard to HE students: some mobile students must work to afford to live in a foreign country (Zhou et al., 2008), and cannot invest as much time as their wealthier peers in studies or internships – which, in turn, would be an investment in their future careers (Wilken & Dahlberg, 2017). Moreover, financial obstacles were the reason for many not to go abroad in the first place (as reported by our interviewees about their peers):

“(...) Because I came thanks to the money I had saved, my family could not pay the trip, and I would not have come. And a lot of people in my class (...) have not come for the same reason, the money.” (Juan, VET mobility from Spain to Germany)

The financial aspect is directly linked to the socio-economic background, with the result that youth from well-off families have higher odds of realising international mobility/experiences. Similarly, participation in mobility differs between countries (see Hemming et al., 2019 in this special issue), in part because poorer countries may have less extensive government funding schemes to finance mobility (Chankseliani, 2016). In contrast to mobile HE students from Hungary, as shown in our data, for HE students from Luxembourg a stay abroad is not a problem, as they are supported with generous state allowances. Again, results reveal context-dependency regarding countries and mobility fields.

Obstacles during mobility

The most relevant differentiation criterion in regard to obstacles during the mobility is the length of the stay abroad, as perceived obstacles seem to differ between those going abroad for few months and those staying longer (up to few years)¹¹.

For some, the financial aspects remain relevant during the period abroad. The qualitative findings show that middle-term goers (few months) relying on an exchange programme perceive the financial burden more than long-term movers (more than a year). It may be clear to long-time movers from the outset, that they have to mostly rely on their own private resources, and funding is

¹¹ There was no upper limit set in regard to the length of the stay abroad. Some scholars label a stay abroad lasting longer than one year as migration. The differentiation based on the length is however contested, e.g. HE degree students stay many years abroad but finally come back home, which indicates rather mobility than migration (King et al., 2010).



thus not perceived as a direct obstacle in the mobility (Navarrete et al., 2017). Furthermore, the interviews indicate that young people have a vague notion of prices in target countries, only becoming aware of the real costs after moving:

“But so far I have been lucky if you want to see it in that way. I have been working and keeping myself busy. Because actually what they told me was true. It’s really expensive in Norway... I pay a lot of things, like my own food, the rent, a lot of expensive things that I didn’t have when I lived with my parents in my own country.” (Alex, employment mobility from Spain to Norway)

The long-period goers are more concerned with issues such as integration envisaged or required in the host country. For long-term goers, proficiency in the language of the host country is important and can determine the success or failure of a mobility, as language enables smooth integration into the new surrounding:

“Because I wanted to go in a German-speaking country to avoid the language barrier.” (Celine, HE degree student mobility from Luxembourg to Austria)

Contacts with locals are critical for obtaining information on the labour market, vacant positions, professional standards or obtaining new clients. As already indicated by other studies international students to some degree complain about limited contacts with locals/nationals (Schartner, 2015)– in which case, lack of language confidence often results in a lack of a sense of belonging (Gu et al., 2010).

This is not the case with shorter stays, where the aim is to *visit* rather than to *live* in a country: contact with the locals/nationals is desirable but not critical to short-term stays in a foreign country. For mobile HE students, pupils and apprentices, as well as working ‘expats’, locals/nationals may be substituted by contact with other international or compatriot peers (Ardic et al., 2018). The Norwegian case illustrates how compatriot peers tend to stick together:

“When we came, we were that many Norwegians that we could just be with each other and we were talking in Norwegian to each other in class. (...) So if I could change one thing, I would be more open and maybe try a little bit harder to make friends with the English people.” (Nora, pupil mobility from Norway to UK)

While peers help each other to tackle the challenges of new situations, they may also lead to cultural trap hindering the mobile youth from embracing the new culture and new relations as well as keeping them away from their intended mobility goals (Ardic et al., 2018).

Furthermore, short-term movers rely more on social contacts at home, as the return home is foreseeable and retaining these contracts is strategic. As the data indicate, being strongly integrated in the home country may lead to homesickness and loneliness abroad, in addition to a mobile life in an international bubble while abroad (Waters & Brooks, 2011) without any essential connection to the host country.

Conclusion

The analysis of the paper had two objectives in mind. The first aim was to show in an explorative manner how obstacles before and during a stay abroad differ between the various mobility types – pupil, HE student, VET, and employment mobility. In contrast to other approaches present in the literature, the comparisons were drawn not between mobile and non-mobile ones but focussed on young people being mobile in different ways. The results from both, the survey and the



interviews, revealed financial problems, lack of or difficulties in access to information and foreign languages as well as limited choices across all mobility types as frequent obstacles. However, the analyses revealed that mobility hindrances are situational, with obstacles differing between mobility types and length of the stay with greatest divergence between the educational and work-related mobilities. In employment mobility, barriers linked to the labour market prevail, while institutional obstacles prevail in educational mobilities.

This observation concurs with the statement that “hybrid multi-institutional and multi-scalar settings – national, transnational and supranational (including the ‘mobility’ of EU borders) – are acknowledged as contexts relevant for the genesis of unequal life chances of mobile populations” (Amelina & Vasilache, 2014: 113). The observed differences in obstacles by mobility types suggest that youth mobility in Europe should not be seen as a homogenous phenomenon; consequently, different mobilities require tailor-made supporting structures and regulations.

The second aim of carrying out this analysis was to complement quantitative and qualitative data to reflect both broader structures and individual nuances in interpretations of obstacles in youth mobility. The consideration of both data sources fosters a more diversified picture. Whereas the quantitative data helped to depict regularities and map the obstacles across the mobility types, qualitative findings added with young people’s rationales and contribute to a clearer picture on the complexity of influences and their dependency on individual and mobility-field context.

This interlinkage provides a solid understanding of what needs to be changed to increase mobility participation among the young people and which negative impacts need to be minimised during their stay abroad, with the most prevalent aspects being financial constraints, language skills and access to information.

Outlook

The field-sensitive data and comparative approach allowed an insight into the multifaceted character of mobility experiences of young Europeans and the obstacles they face. However, this can only be a starting point. More comparative research is needed, involving additional mobility types and countries, especially those less researched, e.g. VET mobility. Analyses going beyond one-off measurements would facilitate evaluation of the influence of institutional and political regulations on the mobility behaviour of young people. This could help to further understand how young people perceive their mobility experience, depending on the time of the assessment (shortly after mobility or a few years later).

Furthermore, the analysis of both data sources helped to detect contradictory findings. One point mentioned in the correspondence analysis was the problem of obtaining the permit to work abroad. In interviews, in a more general perspective, Europe was seen as an unproblematic target location within arm’s reach. Those contradictions need further research effort. On the one hand, they reveal that mobile youth meet still institutional obstacles, while, on the other hand they indicate that young people enjoy the openness of Europe.

Finally, the concept of ‘obstacles’ underlines that *ideal* mobility does not exist: it is the greater or lesser imperfections that make a stay abroad a valuable experience, as young people step out of their comfort zone, get confronted with new cultures and learn how to act and to manoeuvre in new international situations. Dealing with obstacles has to be accepted as vital part of mobility experiences and mobility-related learning. Nevertheless, many young people still need external support, meaning financial help, information provision or guidance, to be able to gain the most out of their mobility experience and to reduce social inequality in horizontal mobilities.



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