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# What ETER tells us about student mobility in European higher education

## Highlights

- Degree mobility at the bachelor level remains concentrated among a small number of HEIs.
- Erasmus credit mobility has its greatest impact in countries where total mobility at the Bachelor, Master and PhD levels is low.
- Mobility at the master level is selective and includes several large HEIs.
- Mobility at the PhD level occurs mainly towards countries with strong international reputation.

This policy brief highlights a core goal of the European Education Area, i.e. furthering student mobility at the international level. It focuses on two distinct facets, i.e. *degree mobility* (students moving after obtaining their secondary degree) and *credit mobility* within the Erasmus program. Using the ETER data, we look at student mobility across higher education institutions, as well as to differences between levels of education, individual HEIs and types of mobility.

As displayed in Figure 1, ETER provides data on the share of mobile degree students for about 1,200 HEIs (out of about 2,500 included in the database). The chart shows that there are large differences by educational level. At the bachelor level (ISCED 6), 77% of the HEIs have less than 10% of mobile students and high levels of mobility are limited to a small number of cases, mostly branch or franchise campuses. At the master level, and even more so at the PhD level, differences between HEIs are larger. In half of all European HEIs, at least one out of every four PhD students will obtain their PhD in a country that is different from where they earned their secondary degree.

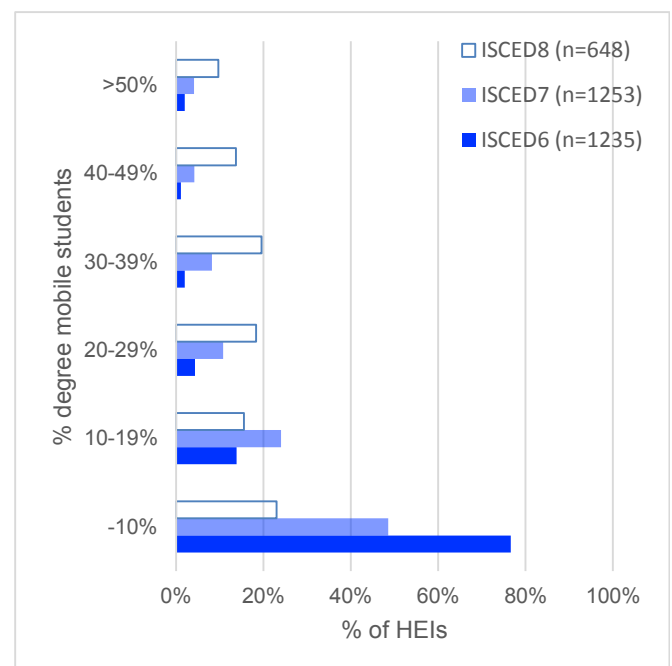


Figure 1. Degree mobility by educational level (year 2013/2014)

## Why is student mobility so important?

Improving student mobility is a core goal of the European Higher Education Area and a major policy priority in the EU's agenda for modernizing higher education. In the words of the European Council, it is “one of the fundamental ways in which young people can strengthen their future employability, as well as their intercultural awareness, personal development, creativity and active citizenship”. At the institutional level, attracting students from other countries is expected to improve the quality of Higher Education Institutions and their ability to recruit talented researchers, as well as having improving education and research quality.

The European Union promotes student mobility through the Erasmus+ programme, which since the late 1980s has enabled more than three million mobile students in Europe to study abroad (<http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/>). The European Union set a target of having 20% of graduates study for a period abroad by 2020. However, according to preliminary data, the amount of outward mobility in EU-28 countries was a mere 2.9% in 2013, with only Cyprus and Luxembourg exceeding the EU benchmark.

## What we know

Student mobility is a complex phenomenon, differing by type of mobility and level of study. We distinguish between *long-term mobility* as reflected by citizenship, *degree mobility*, i.e. students who move after completing their secondary level degree to acquire a degree in another country, and *credit mobility*, i.e. students studying abroad for a defined period to acquire credits for the qualification in their home country. Data covering foreign students and degree mobility at the national level are provided by EUROSTAT ([http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Learning\\_mobility\\_statistics](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Learning_mobility_statistics)). In 2013, 1.45 million students undertaking tertiary level studies in EU Member States came from abroad, i.e. 7% of total enrolled students, divided equally between bachelor and master. Data display large

national differences, with Mediterranean and Eastern European countries having lower shares of mobile students.

## The ETER contribution

The key feature of ETER is a focus on individual HEIs. ETER therefore allows for the consideration of differences in student mobility among HEIs, and therefore, to answer questions like: which HEIs have more mobile students? How significant are differences in mobility between HEIs within the same country? Are there differences between levels of education?

ETER allows for the combination of mobility data with other HEI characteristics, such as legal status, HEI type, size and research intensity, to analyse factors driving student mobility. ETER provides data on foreign (based on citizenships) and mobile students (based on place of prior education) for individual HEIs according to level of education, as well as data on the number of incoming and outgoing Erasmus students. Data on degree mobility covers 19 countries for 2013 and 2014, no data is available for the Czech Republic, Greece, FYROM, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Serbia and Slovakia. The data on credit mobility covers 29 countries.

## Bachelor: focused mobility

International mobility at the bachelor level is focused on specific HEIs. Among the 1,235 HEIs for which there is data available in ETER at the bachelor level (academic year 2013/2014), there were 118 with more than 20% of mobile students and 39 with more than 40%.

Among HEIs with the highest share of mobile bachelor students we identify foreign colleges of US universities (American College in Cyprus and Anglo-American University in Prague) and private universities (Central European University in Hungary, Webster University in Vienna, Jacobs University in Bremen). Also belonging to this group are universities in small countries (University of Liechtenstein), border universities (Università della Svizzera italiana in Lugano, University of Innsbruck), specialized HEIs in music (Mozarteum in Salzburg, Academy of Music in Berlin) and finally, business schools (London School of Economics and Political Science, IE University in Madrid). In other words, the degree of student mobility can be related to disciplinary specialization, geographical location or type of institution. HEIs where more than one out of five students is mobile include several large universities in the UK, as well as three universities in Vienna.

An alternative view is to rank HEIs based on the absolute number of mobile students, which could be defined as their contribution to student mobility. The University of Vienna leads this list with more than 10,000 mobile degree students at the bachelor level, followed by Manchester and Innsbruck, who both have more than 5,000 students. Among the 40 HEIs with more than 2,000 mobile students, 30

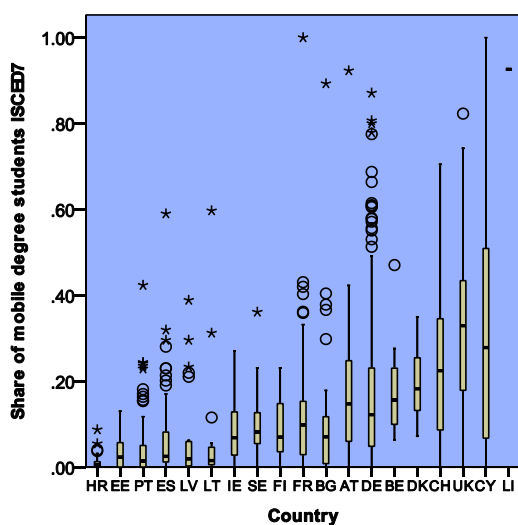


Figure 2. Degree mobility at ISCED7 (master) level 2013/4

Boxplots (Figures 2 and 3) are a way of representing the distribution of HEI values within groups. The upper and lower ends of the boxes represent 75% and 25% of HEIs, while the black line is the median (50% of the HEIs above the line). Stars and circles are extreme values and outliers, i.e. HEIs with a level of mobility much higher than the average. Taller boxes mean that HEIs in a country are more diverse.

are in the UK, five are in Austria, three are in France, and Germany and Switzerland each have one.

### Master: a broader pattern of mobility

The extent of master mobility is larger (median share of mobile students is 10%, against 4% in the bachelor) and more HEIs have a sizeable share of mobile students. At the same time, differences between countries emerge, as displayed in Figure 2. The level of mobility is very high in the UK, fostered by linguistic and historical reasons, but also by the deregulation of tuition fees, which makes non-EU students an interesting market. Swiss HEIs have high shares of mobile students, also due to linguistic reasons.

At this level, there are 105 HEIs with more than 40% and 343 (one-quarter of all HEIs for which there are data in ETER) with more than 20% of degree mobility students. The former are concentrated in the UK (47 HEIs), in Germany (31 HEIs) and in Switzerland (six HEIs). There are nine European universities hosting more than 4,000 degree mobile master students, seven in the UK, one in Austria (Vienna) and one in Germany (TU München). High shares of mobile master students therefore are not limited to small and very specific HEIs, but also involve larger and more reputed European universities.

### PhD: large country differences

Mobility at the PhD level is a widespread phenomenon – more than one PhD student out of three is mobile – which displays significant differences between countries and HEIs. As shown in Figure 3, HEIs in the UK, Switzerland, France, Belgium, Denmark and Sweden systematically have a larger share of mobile PhDs than in other parts of Europe. Among the 148 HEIs where more than two-fifths of the stu-

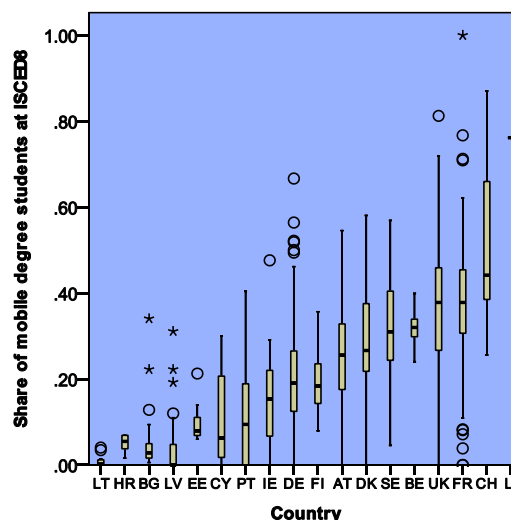


Figure 3. Degree mobility at ISCED8 (PhD) level 2013/4

dents are mobile, 64 are in the UK, 52 are in France, nine are in Germany and eight are in Switzerland. These differences reflect two major drivers: the international research reputation of HEIs and the wide use of the national language overseas. The largest numbers of mobile PhD students in Europe are found in top-ranked research universities, with Cambridge, Oxford and ETH Zurich exceeding 2,000 mobile PhDs, followed by Vienna, UCL, Imperial College and KU Leuven. These figures emphasize the strong asymmetry of PhD student mobility towards top-ranked international universities, which function as European-wide training places for researchers.

| Name                               | Country | Total students | Erasmus incoming |
|------------------------------------|---------|----------------|------------------|
| University of Granada              | ES      | 54304          | 1918             |
| University Complutense, Madrid     | ES      | 72353          | 1731             |
| University of Valencia             | ES      | 47581          | 1722             |
| University of Bologna              | IT      | 80318          | 1678             |
| Charles University Prague          | CZ      | 41038          | 1353             |
| Politechnic University of Valencia | ES      | 32500          | 1293             |
| University of Sevilla              | ES      | 63093          | 1141             |
| University of Barcelona            | ES      | 52060          | 1103             |
| KU Leuven                          | BE      | 45761          | 1041             |
| University of Salamanca            | ES      | 26137          | 1041             |
| University of Rome La Sapienza     | IT      | 112060         | 1030             |
| University of Vienna               | AT      | 76234          | 1018             |

Table 1. Top HEIs by Erasmus incoming students (2013/2014)

### Erasmus students display different patterns

Credit mobility, as observed by Erasmus students, displays rather different patterns. At the HEI level, the number of incoming and outgoing Erasmus students is strongly correlated, displaying how credit mobility is based on reciprocity; the number of Erasmus students is also associated more with the HEI's total number of undergraduate students (the correlation is .683 for incoming and .733 for outgoing students) than with degree mobility. After accounting for HEI size, ETER data shows a much higher level of credit mobility in Spain, followed by Ireland and some Nordic countries (Finland and Sweden particularly). In other words, credit mobility fostered by the Erasmus program tends to focus on different countries and educational levels than degree mobility (70% of the Erasmus mobile students were at the bachelor level) and therefore plays a complementary role in extending the reach of international mobility.

In Europe there are 12 universities with more than 1,000 incoming Erasmus students, seven of which are located in Spain (Table 1). These universities host far more Erasmus students than the number of mobile degree students, with the sole exception of the Technical University of Valencia, KU Leuven and the University of Vienna.

## ETER in a nutshell

The European Tertiary Education Register (ETER) database provides a core set of data on a subset of educational institutions delivering degrees at the tertiary level. ETER is a project funded by the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture in close collaboration with EUROSTAT and the National Statistical Authorities in the participating countries.

ETER provides information on more than 2,465 HEIs in 32 countries and covers the years 2011 to 2013; data are available for EU-28 countries, except the French-speaking region of Belgium, Slovenia and Romania, plus the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Serbia and Switzerland. ETER provides the following information on HEIs:

- Descriptors identify the HEIs and their official status, and provide information on foundation and history.
- Geographical information localizes HEIs in terms of region, city and geographical coordinates and provides information on multi-location campuses.
- Staff data categorizes HEI personnel by academic and non-academic; for academic staff, information is provided on gender, nationality, scientific field, and the number of full professors.
- Numbers of students and graduates broken down by educational level (diploma, bachelor, master), field, gender, nationality and mobility.
- Financial data includes total revenues and their breakdown between core and third party funding, as well as student fees and the composition of expenditures.
- R&D activities include the number of PhD students and graduates, as well as the volume of R&D expenditures.

Most ETER data can be downloaded from the project website ([www.eter-project.com](http://www.eter-project.com)) and used for analytical purposes, making ETER a truly common resource for policy-makers, administrators and scholars. A small portion of ETER data is only available for research purposes after signing a non-disclosure agreement.

## Data on student mobility

ETER provides the following data for each HEI:

- The number and the share of foreign students, i.e. students who do not have the nationality of the country in which they study. This includes both long-term and degree mobility.
- The number and share of mobile students, i.e. students who have physically crossed a national border for studying. The country of origin is defined as the country of prior education, where the upper secondary diploma was obtained. Mobile students exclude foreigners born in the country or those that migrated before obtaining an upper secondary diploma.

These data comply with EUROSTAT statistical definitions.

Data are available by level of study (diploma, bachelor, master, PhD). Data on citizenship are available for more than 90% of the HEIs in ETER, while data on mobility are only available for 60-70% of the HEIs (depending on the level of study), since not all countries have implemented the mobility data collection.

Additionally, ETER includes the number of incoming and outgoing Erasmus students by HEI, based on data from the Directorate General of Education and Culture. Erasmus supports mobility within a curriculum (credit mobility) lasting 3 to 12 months; students acquire credits, which apply towards a degree from their HEI of origin.

## Key references

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