Mobility: Personal development or institutional excellence

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Abstract

The concept and the practice of mobility in higher education may take different forms and have different goals. It is applied to students as well as to teaching and non teaching staff. It refers to short periods of stay (less than six months) in another institution or it may refer to permanent change of institution during the period of education of the student or along the professional career of a member of the teaching or non-teaching staff. Institutions may boast their high mobility (sometimes referred to as internationalization) to signify the disparate personal experience of their students and staff members or they may design the education experience offered to their students as giving them the competences required to take up an active role in society in different locations. In Europe, the grand policy of student and staff mobility induced by the European Union has goals that are both political and practical. Giving the young people an "European", international experience conducive to a stronger feeling of belonging to an European society and culture is clearly a political goal close to the original motivations of the Union, then the EEC. Contributing to the creation of an European labour market may still be seen as a political goal but is also a very pragmatic effort of improving the quality of the education preparing the younger generations to a world of greater global mobility and of integrated economies.

The medieval university teacher and student mobility was abandoned due to the Reformation/Counter Reformation break up of European unity and due to the growth of the university institutions. Of course, knowledge has almost always been very mobile but differentiated national and institutional cultures were highly valued, especially in the romantic nation building era.

In our contemporary world teaching/research staff and student mobility varied a lot. More advanced and productive research intensive systems depended on a large staff mobility that was reinforced with the re-foundation of the university in the XIX century across continental Europe. Students tended to go to their more conveniently located university save for the cases where public finance and a culture of early autonomy induced a great geographic mobility in the transition high school to university. There was a weakening of this effect in recent times that may be linked to the lower public support of university students and to a change in the shape of the personal autonomy of the youngsters.

This paper will discuss the current trends of the staff and student mobility and an attempt will be made at interpreting their goals.

Summary:

1. Modality of the mobility

   a. Permanent transfer of
      i. Students,
      ii. Teaching staff,
      iii. Non-teaching staff;
   b. Temporary transfer of students to external own campus or to another institution following a program under the responsibility of the original institution;
   c. Temporary transfer of students to another institution to follow a program of the destination institution;
   d. Virtual mobility.

2. Goal of the internationalization

   a. Academic quality of the institution;
   b. Proper education of the students;
   c. External (student) market orientation.

1. **Modality of the mobility**

   a. **Permanent transfer of**
      i.   Students,
      ii. Teaching staff,
      iii. Non-teaching staff

The decisions of students are very dependent on the general social conditions and on the availability of public funding. In Portugal, as in most European countries, students tend to seek higher education in the institutions close to their home saving on the expenses incurred by moving into another town away from their families. In some northern European countries the post-war welfare state facilitated the move to distant institutions and many youngsters assumed as their natural right the economic and social independence form their families at 18 when they entered higher education. This "personal right" lost ground as the number of higher education students grew and the welfare state failed to keep pace in the funding. For this reason a convergence in the number of students moving away from home on entering higher education has been observed in the last few years: On the one hand, the number of northern European students seeking higher education away from home decreases and, on the other hand, the number of southern European students moving is on the increase. The decision on the choice of higher education institution becomes more informed and more dependent on the on the adjustment of the goals of the student to the profile of the institution.

The mobility of the labour force is, in general, an important factor to the performance of the economy. This reality has increased importance in higher education where the specialization of the staffs implies a wider mobility to produce the same overall economic effects. The mobility of the teaching and research staff goes hand in hand with the improvement of the quality of the system. Again southern Europe and Portugal very especially have been late comers in the realization of this. In Portugal, it is generally accepted that this is an important limiting factor in the improvement of our teaching and research organizations but very little has been done, or indeed attempted, so far.

In what concerns non teaching staff, the statistical mobility is higher but its strategic impact is limited, what may be related to the very weak role expected from non teaching staff in the universities. The large statutory power given they have since 1976 did not translate into anything meaningful further than the protection of their perceived "labour rights". It should be said that the results of the so-called democratic governance introduced in the aftermath of the 1975 revolution are not very different in what concerns the teaching and the student bodies. This was of crucial importance in the initial stabilization of the institutions and their consolidation along the first decade of its workings, but it did not translate later into mechanisms leading to the definition and implementation of differentiated strategies with the adaptative power required in modern higher education systems.

   b. **Temporary move of students to external own campus or to another institution following a program under the responsibility of the original institution**

This policy is very common in many American universities, particularly n the subjects where the field work or the social experience is assumed to be important. It takes the

form of extra-territorial campus created in locations like Florence, London or Beijing where American students may spend some of their statutory study time under the direct supervision or even the lecturing of American (or American-contracted) lecturers and teachers. This policy is almost unheard of in Europe. The closest situation may be that of English students choosing a sandwich degree with a one year – an extra year – in some foreign institution.

c. Temporary move of students to another institution to follow a program of the destination institution

The best known and largest in impact is the European Commission Erasmus programme that facilitated more than one million students to move across country borders for periods of up to one academic year. Its initial goals were mostly political but it was gradually realised that the personal benefits for the student were such that the programme gained a momentum of its own. Not only within the European Union space but also with other parts of the world Erasmus type mobility is gaining increasing popularity among students and the number of mobile students is steadily increasing notwithstanding the costs incurred.

d. Virtual mobility.

Once the importance of student mobility was recognized, attempts have been made at widening its benefits to students that for financial or other reasons cannot physically move to another institution. A number of in campus and in class strategies have been tested to somehow simulate the experience of students undergoing a mobility experience. Furthermore, the use of electronic communication gives a further contribution to this goal. It is well understood that the experience of the personal mobility of a young person on its own can not be simulated or indeed repeated. However, the recognition that each and every student should acquire the competences associated with mobility justifies any form of trying.

2. Goal of the internationalization

a. Academic quality of the institution

It is widely recognized that an international learning environment is beneficial to students, both in research oriented and in teaching oriented institutions. If this was always recognized and practiced in the research area (in high performing universities), it is a more recent acquisition in what concerns the teaching area. The recognition that active life ceased to be local or regional to become tendentially global leads students and families to seek a modality of education that appears to facilitate the acquisition of the competencies assumed to be required in this new setting. Of course, the relevance and the need of an internationalized education vary widely but the generalized perception of its relevance lead most higher education institutions to boast their international character.

b. Proper education of the students

The University was traditionally organized along well established and differentiated disciplines that corresponded, in most cases, to well known professions like law, medicine, veterinary medicine, agronomy or engineering. The liberal arts gave a background education assumed to be a pre-requisite for any well educated gentleman willing to enter active life outside the established professions or to go into training in one of those professions. This pattern evolved slowly along the last two centuries of industrialization but cannot adjust to our present reality of more than 50% of our youth seeking higher education. In this new context, each student finds it necessary to build there own personal profile that hopefully differentiates his application to enter or to progress in a more competitive job market. In this context a broader education, be it in social or in training terms, assumes an important role. The student may follow two strategies, seeking an institution with a well defined and apparently differentiated mission and set of educational profiles or collecting himself this composite education by going successively to several institutions. In this context, institutions find it advantageous to build and offer to their students some sort of internationalized experience.

c. External market orientation.

An increasing number of institutions attempt at recruiting their student more widely and in some cases making efforts to attract foreign students. This attempts at counterbalancing the increased tendency of students to apply to an institution closest to their home, as discussed above. Two further motivations work in this same direction.

On the one hand, some developed countries recognize that their youth avoids certain domains, especially technical subjects that their economies require. The alternative encouraged by some governments is to recruit abroad with the advantage that this allows the choice of well profiled and best able (future) immigrants.

Another strong motivation is the understanding that education provision may be seen as yet another service ready for export and its weight in the export portfolio of some countries is already very relevant. This line of reasoning is reinforced by the fact that foreign students may be a very lucrative proposition for some financially strapped institutions. Furthermore, international provision may solve the problem of the excess demand in some fast growing economies like China and India.