

THE GEOGRAPHY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN LATVIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION: PREROGATIVE OR 'SECOND CHANCE'

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Abstract. *This paper links geographies of in-flow international students to the higher education system in Latvia and destination country choice rationales. Latvia welcomes international students from diverse geographies. Besides specific sourcing countries like Germany and India, there are also considerably constant and stable flows from former Soviet countries. International students are both an essential source of revenue for higher education institutions and to some extent, replacement of decrease of local students.*

This study adopts a mixed-method approach and based on the analysis of official statistical data and survey data. The survey reveals views on decision-making process and motives of current full-time international students in Latvia. The results indicate that to an extent, geography sets the main motives for study choice in Latvia. Seldom Latvia is set as the only priority destination country. On the one hand, among others balanced costs and accessibility of quality education in English attract foreign students, thus providing 'second chance' to be successful. On the other hand, Latvia gives the prerogative to have education in the European Union which for long-distance travelled students is a life-time opportunity.

Keywords: *foreign students, higher education, human geography, Latvia.*

Introduction

Economic development and success of the country and region largely depend on human capital resources. The young population for that reason is an essential asset for, firstly, the sustainability of educational, secondly, employment system and, thirdly, demographic stability and reproduction. Noteworthy, thus the question on how can Latvia attract and retain human resources, for local educational and employment systems?

Lacking human resources or international students, Latvia does receive but are unable to retain in a longer-term successfully. The higher education system is an essential economic sector in Latvia. Moreover, student mobility is also an element of internationalisation of the higher education institution itself (Mietule et al., 2019). While the increase in international students generates financial benefits in the short term, the proportion of graduates remaining in Latvia and entering the local labour market is modest. Even more students from Western Europe to Latvia are „second chance migrants“ who are looking for the opportunity to be successful. Overall, Latvia is not a favourable destination among immigrants from other countries. However, in the past decade, there is a steady increase in numbers of international students choosing Latvia as their destination country. Latvia due to its geography (Eastern border of the EU), history (post-soviet heritage), social (large number of Russian speaking minority; low integration rates) and economic (low costs of living, low university fees and also low integration into labour market as a drawback) context serves to international students to a lesser extent.

The study aims to link geographies of in-flow international students to the higher education system in Latvia and destination country choice rationales. This study adopts a mixed-method approach and based on the analysis of official statistical data and survey data. The survey reveals views on decision-making process and motives of current full-time international students in Latvia.

Literature review

The migration history within Europe and elsewhere are traditionally strongly connected to inequalities in the home country. Mostly migrants from developing or relatively poor countries choose to move to regions with a higher level of welfare (King, 2017).

Within Europe, there have been several factors that have contributed to international migration. In 1989-1991 and after 2004 eight Central and Eastern European countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia) joined the EU, followed by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and Croatia in 2013. New migration flows ensued from east to west. The so-called periphery-to-core migration rose when people moved from less developed countries to more advanced countries economically as well as socially and politically (King, 2017).

Another major event that contributed to international migration was the 2008 financial crisis. Falling incomes, severe austerity measures that drastically cut welfare, and rising unemployment triggered a new wave of periphery-to-core migration, which continues up to present (King, 2017).

As a result of these European and other global factors, international migration continues to expand. Thanks to the open borders as well as globalization

and internationalization processes, the number of international students keeps growing. The number of mobile students has approximately doubled every 20 years since 1975 (Adnett, 2010). In 2000 there were about 2 million students while in 2007 there were over 5.3 million international students. Following countries, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Germany and the Russian Federation constitute over half of the international students' study in educational programmes in these six countries. Most important sending countries of international students include China, India, Germany, South Korea, Nigeria, France, Saudi Arabia and several Central Asian countries (UNESCO, 2019). Estimates indicate that the number of mobile students will increase up to 7-8 million in the next ten years (Auers & Gubins, 2016).

Factors that encourage students to study overseas are usually categorised in the so-called push and pull factors. Push factors operate within the source country and initiate student's decision to study abroad (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The critical push factors are limited study options in students' home country, desire to live in a different place and to get to know a different culture as well as moving to a different country to increase possible future opportunities to study or work at a specific region. For example, by studying in Latvia, it is possible to get a European diploma which might give more opportunities to work in other European countries like Germany or France (Auers & Gubins, 2016). A lot of students choose to study abroad if they are denied a study place in their home country (Prazeres et al., 2017). Differences in course fees and access to loans significantly influence options of where to study. For some studies abroad is not a privileged choice but rather an alternative if securing a state-funded place in their home country fails (Lulle & Buzinska, 2017).

Pull factors operate within the host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The critical pull factors are availability of studies in a foreign language that the students already know or want to learn, high-quality, specialised study programs that are not available in students' home countries, internationally recognised qualification, acceptable study fee, easy visa application process, as well as an excellent overall country image (Auers & Gubins, 2016).

Although the recognition and prestige of the university are one of the primary pull factors, nowadays, more and more students choose to study abroad because of the place and not the university itself. Instead of international studies as a strategy for future employment, many students seek to go abroad for an opportunity for fun and adventure. Many times, students decide to move to a different country for their different lifestyle that may even determine whether they will settle down in these places after graduation. Popular culture, media and social circles also have a significant role in students' decision-making process

(Prazeres et al., 2017).

More to that many times, students choose to study abroad to increase their opportunities back home. The overseas educational experience indicates fluency in English as well as other characteristics such as confidence, sociability as well as a valuable cultural experience. These characteristics and experiences may provide more opportunities career-wise back in the home country, especially in different international companies (Holloway et al., 2012).

Youth migration has several distinctive features. Most students do not intend to settle permanently in their study country but move back home or to a different country after graduation. Some migrants, however, settle longer-term.

In the EU, migration has become very easy as EU citizens have the right to residence, work and study in other member-states. Youth mobility usually is sudden and spontaneous. Although the family has a significant role in students' decision on studying abroad, nowadays, the role of the family is diminishing (King, 2017). For many international studies allow gaining better employment opportunities after graduation (Baláz & Williams, 2004), for some, it increases the social and cultural capital (Holloway et al., 2012) and often drawback of part-time employment during studies (Arkoudis et al., 2019). According to the choice of destination, there are different opportunities to acquire lifelong skills and competences, to enhance the welfare and to shape identities, as well as risks and uncertainties (Williams & Baláž, 2012).

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach and is based on the analysis of official statistical data and survey data. The first stage of the mixed method approached included scrutinised work with the secondary data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia and Ministry of Education and Science that reveal the actual situation in Latvia concerning: 1) the total number of youth aged 15 to 34; 2) the number of local and international students at the beginning of the academic year in period 2004 to 2018; 3) the share of emigrated young people in the period from 2004 to 2017.

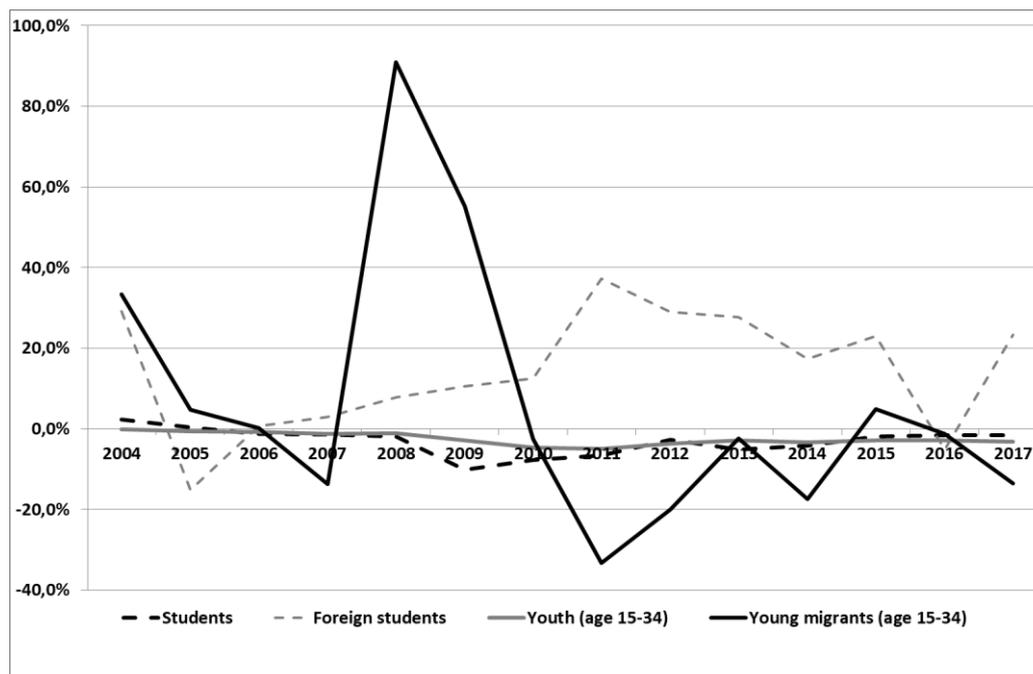
The second stage of the mixed-method approach involved a survey with international students in Latvia. The questionnaire was designed within the framework of the project "Latvia as an escalator: internationalisation, youth labour market performance, regional and human capital disequilibria in Latvia". The questionnaire includes 40 questions, divided into thematic blocks - basic characteristics of the student, previous schooling experiences, motivations to study abroad, the choice to study abroad, satisfaction with the current life and strategies on future carrier plans. The primary purpose of the survey was to reveal views on the decision-making process for international study move to Latvia and

motives of current full-time international students in Latvia. Questionnaires were distributed to 492 students representing the foremost higher education institutions in Latvia (for example: University of Latvia, Riga Stradins University, Riga Technical University etc.) and four main geographic profiles: 1) European countries (n=188); 2) South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka) (n=177); 3) post-soviet countries (n=97); 4) Other countries (Canada, USA etc.).

The software of PASW Statistics 18 for survey data array analysis used in this study. Two econometric data methods for data analysis used: 1) Pearson chi-square test; 2) Analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA).

Dynamics of the local youth and international students in Latvia

Since 2007 the number of enrolled students decrease. Decline (see Figure 1) in local student numbers relate to two critical factors - the low fertility rate around 2000, resulting in a low youth population in Latvia today, as well as the high emigration rate, which also includes young people emigrating for study and work-related reasons.



Note. Figure 1 shows changes of youth and students in actual year comparing to previous year in percent.

Figure 1 Changes of the number of youth and students in Latvia 2004-2017
(authors' elaborations, IZM, 2019; CSP, 2018)

Latvia's accession to the European Union made intra-EU relocation more accessible and less cost involving. As displayed in Figure 1, the global economic

crisis in 2007 – 2010 negatively contributed to the decrease in the number of young people in Latvia. Since 2010 there is a steady increase of international students in Latvia. In 2018, India, Uzbekistan, Germany, Russia, Sweden, Ukraine, Finland, Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka and Pakistan were the countries with the most significant number of students. Currently, students from 95 different countries around the world are studying in Latvia (Ministry of Education and Science, 2019). The most common study directions for international students are social science and business management, followed by medicine and health care. There are different geographical trends in the choice of study paths: students from the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and Georgia tend to prefer social science and business management, while European students tend to opt for medical and health care programs. Asian students do not have a single field of study and have a broader range of interests - they study engineering, medicine, social science, and business management (Auers & Gubin, 2016).

Latvia as a destination country: prerogative or 'second chance'

Analysis of data (Table 1) show that there is a significant relationship between the four groups of students $X^2(1, N = 472) = 18.7, p = .000$. Latvia is more likely the first choice for studies abroad for students from South-Asia, but less likely for students from Europe and Post-Soviet countries. These findings reveal that Latvia works as a second choice for students from countries with limited studying opportunities due to a restricted number of students in particular study programs (for example, medicine in Germany, France) or the country in general (for example, Uzbekistan).

Table 1 Latvia as a firsts choice for studies abroad per country group (created by the authors)

	Latvia as main destination for studies	
	YES	NO
POST-SOVIET	41,5%	58,5%
SOUTH-ASIA	54,1%	45,9%
EUROPE	32,4,%	67,6%
OTHER	58,3%	41,7%

Source: Survey, 2019, N=492

32.4% of European students claim that studying in Latvia was their first choice. Other options included universities back in their home countries as well as other European universities; for example, many medical students stated that they were considering applying to Semmelweis University in Budapest, Hungary,

which is famous for medicine studies. From Post-Soviet countries, 41.5% of the students stated that studying in Latvia was their first choice. Their other options included universities in Europe, as well as in North America and Russia. Out of students from India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, as many as 54.1% stated that studying in Latvia was their first choice. Their other options mostly included different Latvian universities.

Students find studying in English very easy. They also do not find it hard to make friends in Latvia and to adjust to Latvian culture, especially easy it seems for students from Post-Soviet countries. The hardest aspect of living abroad for all students is finding a local job while studying. Only about 17% of the students have found a part-time job in Latvia. Out of European students, only 9% have found a job while from Post-Soviet countries as well as from India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka students have been in a better situation – 26% and 20%, respectively. Many students, especially from Europe, did not provide an answer to the question about how hard it is to get a job in Latvia, stating that they are not even looking for one.

Detailed analysis of the destination country decision-making process reveals that for them to study in Latvia, it was essential to study in the English language and also the quality of the studies. This indication has the highest overall mean value rating (4.44) among students from Post-soviet countries (4.13) for South-Asia respondents and (4.8) among European Students. Nevertheless, the lowest factor among all groups within the analysis of Latvia as a destination choice was low engagement with friends and relatives from Latvia. Crucial is also modest first wish for the opportunities to engage in the employment opportunities with a mean value of 3.04 among students from the Post-soviet countries, the mean value of 2.94 among South-Asian students, and the lowest among Europeans (mean value) 1.61. An increasing number of international students' engagement in the local labour market in various fields of economics is alarming. However, it still raises a question – does knowledge and skills of international students is appropriate for priorities of economic development of Latvia.

A one-way ANOVA conducted to compare the importance of several motivation factors to study in Latvia among four groups of students. The results are quite similar in the four geographical groups analysed except that the students from European countries tended to have lower scores than students from other countries. Firstly, students from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka tend to value higher and appreciate studying in the Baltic region as well as a cultural experience and living in a city. Findings also show that students from South-Asia appreciate the costs of living in Latvia. At the same time the costs of living are not important at all for students from more wealthy countries in Europe (For example, Norway, Sweden, France, Germany). Secondly, students from Post-Soviet countries (For example, Russia, Uzbekistan, Belarus) valued higher potential employment

opportunities as well as socialising in the Russian language. These findings reveal the on-going trend that students from Post-soviet countries combine a part-time job while studying. It is easier for them than for students from other groups to find a job in Latvia, because many people speak Russian (notably in the capital city – Riga) which makes it easier for students from Post-Soviet countries to communicate with others and look for possible employment opportunities.

Thirdly, findings confirm that Latvia as a destination is a „second choice“ among students from Europe. Also, their rating on getting European diploma is not as high compared to other students. Possibly again geography of origin set their choice. Studying in Europe is taken for granted thus educational documents from an institution in Europe more accessible compared to somebody from a more distant geographies. Most of the motivation factors European students rated lower than other student groups, except living in a city. Hence, we can hypothesises that attraction of Riga as a place for the study period, and the chosen study program is much appreciated.

Table 2 Latvia as a destination country: the analysis of favourable factors per country group (created by the authors)

Measure	POST-SOVIET		SOUTH-ASIA		EUROPE		OTHER		F (3, 492)
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Quality of studies	4,16	0,88	4,02	1,15	3,69	1,14	4,04	1,37	4,72**
Studies in the Baltic region	2,60	1,28	3,38	1,29	2,14	1,22	2,14	1,38	29,71**
Studying in English	4,44	0,93	4,13	1,18	4,08	1,09	3,96	1,48	2,78*
Friends living in Latvia	1,86	1,20	2,13	1,35	1,66	1,11	1,48	1,05	5,04**
Family living in Latvia	1,48	1,02	1,62	1,16	1,34	0,98	1,28	0,89	2,29
Employment opportunities	3,04	1,32	2,94	1,39	1,61	1,09	2,88	1,48	42,11**
Cost of living	3,54	1,07	3,77	1,25	2,70	1,16	3,21	1,40	25,29**
Cultural experience	3,14	1,36	3,77	1,25	2,69	1,20	2,93	1,41	21,16**
Living in or near a city	2,96	1,50	3,57	1,30	3,15	1,39	3,00	1,59	4,99**
Socialising in Russian	2,55	1,56	2,44	1,31	1,47	1,09	1,63	1,20	19,38**

*Note: *p<0.05, **p<0.01*

Source: Survey, 2019, N=492

Conclusions

This paper links geographies of in-flow international students to the higher education system in Latvia and choice rationales upon choosing Eastern European country Latvia as a destination country for the study period. Latvia welcomes international students from diverse geographies. Besides specific sourcing countries like Germany and India, there are also considerably constant and stable flows from former Soviet countries. For purposes of this study, three main groups are depending on the country of origin distinguished, namely, students from

Europe, East-Asia, Post-soviet countries and others.

On the one hand, among others balanced costs and accessibility of quality education in English attract international students, thus providing a „second chance“ to be successful. On the other hand, Latvia gives the prerogative to have education in the European Union which for long-distance travelled students is a life-time opportunity.

The results indicate that geography sets the primary motives to choose Latvia. Seldom Latvia is set as the first and only priority among other possible destination countries, however, more often among students from South- Asia which relate to relatively lower costs of living and opportunities to study in English. At the same time, Latvia is a „second choice“ for students from Europe, although Latvia is not the priority to students from the Post-Soviet countries. Nevertheless, still a well-recognised study destination for them due to facilitated communication in everyday life and accessible employment opportunities.

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