

The Significance of International Student Mobility in Students' Strategies at Third Level in Ireland

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1 Contents

1	Contents	2
2	Tables and figures	3
3	Executive summary.....	4
4	Background to the study	7
4.1	Internationalisation of higher education and student mobility.....	7
4.2	International student mobility and inequality.....	7
4.3	Degree and credit mobility.....	11
4.4	Erasmus	14
4.5	The state of research in Ireland	17
5	Presentation of the research	20
5.1	Rationale.....	20
5.2	Research questions	21
5.3	Methodology	21
5.4	Profile of respondents (questionnaire)	24
6	Erasmus and Ireland in numbers.....	26
6.1	Statistical information on student flows to and from Ireland.....	26
6.2	Erasmus flows	28
7	The organisation of student mobility at institutional level	33
7.1	The policy framework	33
7.2	Institutional strategies	34
7.3	Inequalities between institutions: partnerships	38
7.4	Inequalities between Erasmus and non-EU exchange.....	42
7.5	A loosening of the traditional exchange framework	44
8	Increasing participation: risks and opportunities	49
8.1	A positive experience for most.....	49
8.2	Motivations to go abroad: a disconnection between student and institutional strategies?.....	52
8.3	The effects of mandatory participation	56
8.4	Limited choice of destinations	58

8.5	Teaching and learning: unequal experiences and outcomes	59
8.6	Other issues	61
9	Conclusions.....	63
10	Recommendations.....	65
11	References.....	67

2 Tables and figures

Table 1.	Gender of respondents	24
Table 2.	Destination country of respondents	24
Table 3.	Subject area of respondents	25
Table 4.	Change in destination countries for Irish students 2001-2012	31
Table 5.	Trends by language spoken in destination country.....	32
Table 6.	Students' motivation to go on a year abroad	54
Table 7.	Students' views of the compulsory nature of participation in study abroad.....	56
Figure 1.	Trends in student mobility to and from Ireland 2001-2015	27
Figure 2.	Evolution of Erasmus outgoing numbers from Ireland 2001-2013.....	28
Figure 3	Outgoing Erasmus students by subject area (2001-2002)	29
Figure 4.	Outgoing Erasmus students by subject area (2011-2012)	30
Figure 5.	Destination countries for Irish students in 2014.....	30
Figure 6.	Number of outgoing students per Irish HEI 2012	37
Figure 7.	Outgoing Erasmus students as percentage of undergraduate student population per Irish HEI 2012.....	38
Figure 8.	UK partnerships by rank bracket. Source: Courtois, 2018.....	40
Figure 9.	Non-EU partnerships by rank bracket. Source: Courtois, 2018.	40
Figure 10.	Four types of exchange (source: Courtois, 2017).....	47

3 Executive summary

This report is based on a two-year study conducted under the NUI Dr Garret FitzGerald Post-Doctoral Fellowship for the Social Sciences. A number of academic papers have been published based on this study (Courtois, 2016, 2017, 2018) with two additional papers currently in review. The present document reports on specific aspects of the research that have been identified as being of interest to higher education institutions in Ireland.

The motivation for the study was a concern for the lack of research on the experiences of Irish students engaging in short-term mobility for studies, in a context where Irish higher education institutions are encouraged to increase outgoing numbers.

The study employed a qualitative methodology. It was based principally on documentary research, a qualitative questionnaire and in-depth interviews with staff and students engaged in outgoing mobility.

Outgoing student mobility brings a number of benefits at individual, institutional, national and regional levels:

- Students report increased self-confidence, autonomy, intercultural and interpersonal skills. A number of students reported increased confidence in relation to academic progress and career prospects
- Returning students are more aware of the international presence on their campuses, which can help improve the experience of incoming international students
- Returning students are inclined to recommend their university to incoming students and promote their home country in general
- Students develop a deeper understanding of the European project and are drawn to the idea of European careers

The year or term abroad is a positive experience for the vast majority of students. For many, it is an opportunity for independent living, travel, discovery and building international networks. Students value the experiential learning provided by the experience.

Students for whom the year or term abroad is mandatory are more likely to report mixed or negative experiences. However the majority still report having a positive experience.

A number of specific issues emerged:

- Students were satisfied with the support provided by their international office at home but generally dissatisfied with the administrative services at their host university.
- The main source of dissatisfaction is the academic aspect of the experience. Students reported significant issues in relation to access to modules; inadequate level (in particular, modules offered only to international students that proved unchallenging or irrelevant to their course of study) and lack of academic support at the host institution. A minority of students reported that the experience was detrimental to their academic progress.
- There are significant discrepancies between the programmes and destinations offered by Irish higher education institutions in terms of quality and institutional support.
- The cost of the year abroad still represents a significant barrier for some students; the format of the 'add-on' year is problematic in this respect

The study indicates that despite the perception that the year abroad is above all an opportunity for leisure, discovery and self-development and/or a strategy for CV-enhancement, students also place a high value on academic and cultural learning and have high expectations in this respect. These expectations are not always met.

In relation to the objective of increasing outgoing numbers, three main risks were identified:

- Unless better resources are invested (both by Irish institutions and their partners), quality issues may become more prevalent, in particular with Erasmus destinations and/or destinations in countries that focus on a commercial approach to incoming student mobility
- The shift away from the principle of exchange as an academic experience and the growing focus on lifestyle and employability in the promotion of

exchange will not appeal to all students and will potentially exclude those with limited financial means

- The diversification of destinations comes with a marked stratification between the more prestigious (often non-EU) and less prestigious (often Erasmus) destinations; this is amplified by different levels of resources allocated to some schemes compared to others; and by the limited access that some students have to specific schemes

The main challenges for Irish higher education institutions are:

- To ensure that partner universities offer students a positive academic experience
- To invest resources commensurate with the continued expansion of outgoing numbers
- To provide financial and logistic support to disadvantaged students
- To consider the implications of the growing stratification of exchange destinations for equality in higher education
- To address the growing disconnection between faculty and administrative/management staff in relation to outgoing mobility and internationalisation in general

4 Background to the study

4.1 Internationalisation of higher education and student mobility

Internationalisation has been characterised as one of the most significant transformations in the landscape of third-level education worldwide. Definitions of internationalisation in higher education vary and are the object of much policy and scholarly debate. A useful starting point is the widely used definition proposed by Jane Knight:

Internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education (Knight, 2003a).

Internationalisation is a multi-faceted process. One of its most visible features is the cross-border movement of students. While it is not a new phenomenon – students, as well as scholars, have always crossed borders – it has greatly expanded over the last two decades and is set to continue growing. It was estimated that in 2015, five million students were studying outside their home countries, twice the number in 2000 (ICEF, 2015). In addition, international student mobility is in constant transformation, as student flows change alongside regional power shifts and/or under the effect of strategic policy-making at regional, national and institutional levels.

4.2 International student mobility and inequality

On the one hand, international student mobility has the potential to increase educational opportunities for students in the developing world, and more generally in places where the development of higher education systems has not kept up with the increase in demand:

- Through university partnerships and with the support of scholarships and bursaries, it can be an instrument in capacity building in developing countries.

- Historically, it has allowed economically privileged but underrepresented or oppressed groups (women, Jewish people) to circumvent obstacles in their home countries (Karady, 2002).
- The broader benefits of international student mobility in terms of knowledge flows, research collaboration and intercultural understanding are well understood.

However, international education researchers are increasingly concerned with the limitations and risks associated with the new forms taken by internationalisation. From the 1970s onwards, two leading receiving European countries, France and the UK, began to implement policies restricting immigration and consequently the right of foreigners to study in these countries (Slama, 1999; Perraton, 2014). Incoming student mobility was framed as a threat in need of regulation. In France, these measures heralded what Slama called ‘the end of the foreign student’, namely the end of free movement and individual mobility for studies, and the beginning of an era of regulation and subjection of student mobility to national imperatives. After this first shift, internationalisation took a commercial turn with the introduction of fees for international students in many countries.

Thus, since the late 2000s/early 2010s, the work of Jane Knight - a leading scholar in the field and early supporter of internationalisation – increasingly reflects growing concerns about the “unintended consequences” of higher education internationalisation, most notably commercialisation, diploma mills, brain drain and institutional competition in the era of international university rankings. She argues that these phenomena pose a direct threat to the capacity of international education to produce the positive outcomes it is commonly associated with (Knight, 2009, 2013).

Many scholars argue that internationalisation and student mobility potentially pose a threat to equity in higher education:

- Cross-border student flows reflect and reproduce regional imbalances because developed, English-speaking countries dominate the ‘market’. In addition, these flows have historically reflected – and to some extent continue to reflect – the dominated position of former colonies, with implications in relation to the direction of knowledge flows, and brain drain. The logic of prestige and financial calculations increasingly overcomes the logic of aid to development (Khoo, 2011).

- Under the influence of international rankings, competition has accelerated, leading to a marked stratification of destinations (Marginson, 2016). The race for status amplifies existing inequalities between institutions. ‘Selective affinities’ in university partnerships reflect and amplify existing status hierarchies between institutions (Ballatore and Bloss, 2008). Consequently, the individual benefits of mobility have become more differentiated as well.
- Commercial internationalisation prioritises privileged over underprivileged students. Even where equality in access may be a core concern at national level, it is rarely a preoccupation when it comes to international students as “the demand for educational equality stops at the border” (Tannock, 2013).
- Another aspect of inequality concerns the way international students may be treated compared to local students. Commercial internationalisation and deregulation increase the risks for international students falling prey to fraudulent practices, as was famously the case in Australia (Altbach, 2007) and also happened recently in the UK and Ireland with the failure of a number of private for-profit English language colleges.
- The fact that students cross borders to study may suggest that ‘their’ education system is inferior; consequently they may be constructed as “supplicants, strangers, outsiders, consumers, social isolates and people in learning or linguistic ‘deficit’” (Marginson, 2013: 9). Where they are recruited to enhance the international profile of an institution, they may be viewed as symbolic capital as well as economic resources, a de-humanising, reductive view associated with what has been termed “neoliberal multiculturalism” (Melamed, 2011; Mitchell, 2003). Non-white students in particular are at risk of racism or neo-racism (Lee and Cantwell, 2011; Robertson, 2011).
- National immigration law and regulations around access to work or healthcare further undermine their status inside and outside the university, leading to increased economic, social and psychological vulnerability (Marginson et al., 2010).

International student mobility offers opportunities to seek and maintain positional advantage. These opportunities come at a price and are more easily accessible to the privileged (Brooks and Waters, 2009). Student mobility is

often examined from the perspective of the “push–pull framework”; or that of the “college choice” framework (Beerkens et al., 2016). In both frameworks, and in particular the latter, privileged (or socially unequal) strategies come into play: by investing in international mobility, some students may acquire prestigious credentials. Looking at the UK, Brooks and Waters argue that US universities provide a prestigious alternative for those who did not gain entry to Oxbridge (2009). In this line of thought, Foskett (2010) argues that the ‘global market in higher education’ has made discernible three distinct ‘tiers’ of internationally mobile students:

- The ‘top tier’ is a globally mobile student elite, undeterred by high tuition fees, visa restrictions or travel costs. These are free to choose the most prestigious destinations.
- The second tier consists of less privileged students who, due to budget limitations, need to calculate precisely (or speculate on) the costs and benefits of mobility in order to improve their employment prospects.
- Below is a third tier of students who are either not mobile at all, or whose mobility is limited to neighbouring and low-cost destinations.

Thus, even within the (relatively privileged) field of international mobility for studies, the ability to be mobile, the shape taken by mobility and the benefits of mobility are very much tied to socio-economic circumstances. To these must be added the gendered and ability-based barriers to international mobility as well as issues related to immigration regimes.

Yet the desire to be internationally mobile is spreading far beyond the small elite who traditionally had exclusive access to it. The desire for ‘cosmopolitan capital’ as a means to improve employability is widespread (Rivzi, 2011: 698; Sidhu, 2006). In times of uncertainty, when “the degree is not enough” (Tomlinson, 2008), acquiring cosmopolitan capital may be perceived as a way to maintain or gain positional advantage; but budget limitations and/or an imperfect understanding of the ‘market’ may lead students in the second and third tiers to miscalculate the benefits of their investment. One such example is given by Wagner and Garcia (2015) in their study of Mexican students choosing an MBA education in France. A French MBA has little value on the Mexican labour market dominated by holders of North-American diplomas. In this case, Mexican students find themselves worse off in career terms than if they had not travelled at all. Studying in France was until recently

a good investment for students from specific eastern European and Northern African countries, where the legal or civil service system was modelled on the French system (Karady, 2002), but this is changing also due to the hegemonic position of English-speaking destinations. The destination matters; benefits differ accordingly; but student choices are conditioned by their socio-economic circumstances and differentiated access to information.

Thus, in some ways, the internationalisation of higher education comes with risks. In particular, it creates new forms of stratification between institutions, and allows the more privileged students to benefit from a market (or quasi-market) situation (Atherton, 2013; McCarthy and Kenway, 2014). This is the case for ‘exporting’ countries such as China (Kim, 2015) but is true as well for students from receiving countries such as the UK (Brookes and Waters, 2009). It is therefore increasingly necessary to pay attention to this phenomenon.

4.3 Degree and credit mobility

Both the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS, 2006) and the OECD (OECD, 2006) define mobile or internationally mobile students as those who have crossed a national border and moved to another country with the objective to study. Thus, internationally mobile students are a distinct sub-group of the broader category ‘foreign students’. Foreign students are those who are not citizens of their country of study; but some of these may not have moved to their country of study with the sole purpose of studying there. In practice however, many countries use citizenship, or lack thereof, as a defining characteristic of internationally mobile students. According to the IAU (2015), internationally mobile students also include students enrolled on distance-learning programmes.

There are various types of student mobility. The most common distinction is between credit and degree mobility. Degree mobility is defined as:

the physical crossing of a national border to enrol in a degree programme at tertiary-level in the country of destination. The degree programme would require the students’ presence for the majority of courses taught. Degree mobile students are enrolled as regular students in any semester/term of a degree programme

taught in the country of destination, which is different from their country of origin ... with the intention of graduating from the programme in the country of destination (European Commission, 2015a: 6).

By contrast, credit mobility is defined as:

temporary tertiary education or/and study-related traineeship abroad within the framework of enrolment in a tertiary education programme at a "home institution" (usually) for the purpose of gaining academic credit (i.e. credit that will be recognised in that home institution). Graduates who have had a credit mobility stay are graduates from [their home institution] (European Commission, 2015a: 8).

To distinguish between credit and degree mobility, it is often assumed that students who have been enrolled in a course of study abroad for at least one year are planning to study a full programme and are therefore engaged in degree mobility.

The literature identifies a number of differences between (as well as within) these two categories:

- From an institutional perspective, drawing degree mobile students is more lucrative because in many jurisdictions these pay tuition fees. By contrast, exchange students only pay fees (if any) at their home university, provided the exchange is reciprocal as is the case under Erasmus and other programmes.
- The population of degree mobile students is more eclectic and differentiated socially, compared to Erasmus students, who tend to be relatively homogeneous not only socially, but also in terms of age and academic level (Erlich, 2012).
- Degree mobile students are more oriented towards later occupational mobility compared to those engaging in credit mobility; in other words, degree mobility is more commonly associated with mobility/migration strategies, compared with credit mobility (Carlson, 2011; Wiers-Jensse, 2008). In countries where such systems are in operation, only degree students are targeted by 'two-step' immigration processes while exchange students are considered as short-term visitors with no claim to citizenship.

- Erasmus and other exchange students are limited in their choices by institutional frameworks and in particular by the partnership agreements signed by their home universities. Generally speaking, exchange students can only choose from a list established by their own institution. In addition, certain programmes may not allow students to take time abroad (this is the case of some courses accredited by a local association). Places on exchange programmes may be available only to students with the best results; or they may be allocated by staff with limited input from students.

Compared with students who engage in degree mobility, exchange students can hardly be considered as ‘free movers’ and are relatively limited in the range of privileged strategies they can deploy. Going back to Foskett’s (2010) of the three “tiers”, we may assume that the more privileged “top tier” is more likely to engage in degree rather than credit mobility. Furthermore,

- Wächter (2014) argues that student flows move in different directions depending on whether these engage in credit or degree mobility. Degree mobility is generally from countries with underdeveloped higher education systems and moves towards countries with better provision. On the other hand, credit mobility is based on the principle of equivalence and is more likely to take place between institutions that are relatively similar. This leads Wächter (2014) to argue that degree mobility is “vertical” (more unequal) while credit mobility is “horizontal” (less unequal).
- On a more practical level, credit mobility does not impact students’ credentials in the same way as degree mobility does because students will be awarded a degree from their home institution regardless. It takes place over a shorter period of time and as a result requires fewer economic and social resources; in particular where scholarship and grants are in place (as is the case under the Erasmus programme).
- Finally, research indicates that motivations to do with lifestyle and consumption play a significant role in intra-European mobility for credit (Rodriguez, Bustillo Mesanza, and Mariel 2011; Van Bouwel and Veugelers 2013). By contrast, degree mobility is understood to be motivated mainly by the appeal of ‘top-quality’ institutions (Rivzi 2011;

Sidhu 2006). Rankings have more impact on degree-mobile students' decisions and destination choices.¹

Credit mobility is therefore a specific phenomenon within international student mobility and is less frequently examined from the perspective of privileged strategies.

4.4 Erasmus

In Europe, credit mobility is commonly associated with the Erasmus programme. The Erasmus programme has been a significant driver of student mobility in Europe. Launched in 1987, it has since allowed over 3 million students to study abroad. It has evolved over time to include graduate students, work placements, academic staff and so forth; while offering a broader range of destinations. Under the current programme, Erasmus+, it is hoped that by 2020, 20 per cent of European students will benefit from an experience abroad (Council of the European Union, 2011).

For students enrolled on undergraduate courses in their home countries, Erasmus gives access to some of the perceived benefits of international mobility. The Erasmus programme allows students to spend a semester or a full academic year in one of 34 participating countries without paying additional fees to the host institution. Participating students receive a small grant, which covers some of their travel and accommodation costs. Typically, students take up modules equivalent to those they would have studied at home and accumulate credits (ECTS), which are then transferred back to their home university and count towards their final grade.

Since the 1980s, the goals and scope of the Erasmus programme have changed significantly. Originally, the rationale for the programme was based on the idea of mutual understanding and cooperation between European nations. Sofia Corradi, a key figure in the design of the Erasmus programme (she was nicknamed "Mama Erasmus"), wanted an exchange system based on voluntary self-selection and supported by grants (Nørgaard, 2014). This system, based on the notion of mutual recognition, was designed to enhance the cultural

¹ Santiago et al (2008) note that typically, candidates for study abroad programmes choose their country of destination before they choose a particular institution. This is particularly the case for undergraduate students, for whom lifestyle issues are important, while postgraduate students are more likely to consider institutional reputation first (Woodfield, 2012, p. 119).

experience by exposing students to a familiar academic content presented through unfamiliar local norms. Corradi wanted participation to be entirely voluntary and unhindered by financial issues. The idea of mutual recognition is slightly different from the principle of equivalence (on which the ECTS system is based): it is based on the principle of trust between institutions, rather than on quantitative appraisals of course and module content.

The programme has evolved significantly since the 1980s. In particular, it has been ‘massified’, namely extended to much larger numbers of students; and its rationale is now expressed in economic rather than cultural terms. The Bologna process is usually recognised as one of the most significant instruments in this major shift in the way European higher education is understood (Bruno, Clément, and Laval 2010). As in other areas, the language around student mobility shifted to economic competitiveness and employability. Student mobility is now explicitly framed as a way to address economic issues at regional level, in particular youth unemployment and the declining competitiveness of European higher education, research and industry.

Thus, the main aims of the new ‘Erasmus+’ programme launched in January 2014 are to help combat youth unemployment, supply employers with adequately skilled workers, modernise European universities and enhance the economic competitiveness of Europe (European Commission, 2016: 7). European-wide evaluations of the Erasmus programme tend to focus on employability and skills such as adaptability, flexibility, problem-solving abilities and so forth (see for instance EC, 2014; Janson, Schomburg and Teichler, 2009). Student mobility is also expected to assist European higher education institutions in their modernisation efforts (Algulhon and Convert, 2011). Researchers who have analysed European policy over time note that the language of social justice and equality has almost disappeared from policy documents on student mobility (Hadfield and Summerby-Murray, 2016; Dvir and Yemini, 2017).

A range of programmes have been established to redress inequality in access (for instance, specific programmes for students with disabilities; differential grants based on the cost of living in destination countries; etc.). However, for most participants, the Erasmus grant only covers a portion of the costs associated with a term or year abroad (typically, the cost of flights and little else). Consequently, it is too low to equalise access in any meaningful way. As large-scale quantitative country-specific and European-wide studies

have stubbornly demonstrated over time (e.g. Geehards and Hans, 2013), participants in the Erasmus programme tend to be from middle-class backgrounds. They are also younger, have better academic results, and are more likely to have previous international experience (Ballatore, 2011; 2013). A recent study focused on Germany suggests that in fact, the social selectivity of the Erasmus programme has increased, rather than decreased, over the years (Netz and Finger, 2016). Interestingly, in Beerkens et al.'s recent comparative study of seven countries (2016), home ties and lack of interest emerge as the strongest predictors of non-participation; but arguably socio-economic circumstances play a significant role as well.

The previous section gave examples of the impact of institutional and cross-national status differentiation on the benefits of study abroad for degree-mobile students. Much less is known about the implications for credit-mobile students:

- Large-scale evaluations such as *The Erasmus Impact Study* (EC, 2014) or *The Professional Value of Erasmus Mobility* (Janson, Schomburg and Teichler, 2009) rely on self-reporting, namely on the impressions of returning students who have not yet sought employment.
- Other studies based on statistical analysis of employment figures link international experience acquired through Erasmus with higher wages and lower risk of unemployment; however their results are distorted by the fact Erasmus students come from higher socio-economic backgrounds and self-select into the programme.
- Studies of employers' perceptions suggest that employers value international experience, language skills and other skills associated with the Erasmus experience. Again, it is difficult to disentangle participation in Erasmus, social class and these various soft skills.

In other words, the social selectivity of exchange programmes may amplify existing class-based differences; but it is unclear whether a democratisation of access to Erasmus (which is not the same as massification) would have an equalising effect in terms of employability and other individual benefits.

4.5 The state of research in Ireland

Much of the academic literature about international student mobility in Ireland focuses on incoming rather than outgoing students. This literature highlights the difficulties international students have in integrating on Irish campuses, both academically and socially, due to cultural differences as well as to institutional barriers (e.g. Sheridan, 2011). It is tangentially relevant in the sense that it prefigures the difficulties Irish students may have when studying abroad.

Su-Ming Khoo's (2011) work on higher education and development is relevant to the topic of international student mobility as it explores the rationales guiding the internationalisation of Irish universities, in a comparative perspective. In particular, she examines the turn from "ethical internationalisation" with a focus on aid and development to a more commercial approach focused on generating revenue, with diminished concern for the global impact of Irish higher education activities. Marie Clarke recently started a project on the internationalisation of Irish higher education, based at UCD and funded by the Irish Research Council (2015-17).

Both Ellen Hazelkorn and Kathleen Lynch explore the impact of international rankings – one aspect of internationalisation – and increased competition on higher education in Ireland and elsewhere (Hazelkorn, 2015; Lynch, 2013). More broadly, an expanding body of literature examines the 'neo-liberalisation' and marketisation of Irish higher education (Bruce, 2006; Holborrow, 2012; Lynch, Grummell and Devine, 2012; Lolic, 2011, Lolic and Lynch, 2016; Mercille and Murphy, 2015; O'Brien and Brancalone, 2010). These works are located in the critical literature on globalisation and the transformations of higher education but do not focus specifically on the phenomenon of student mobility. Likewise, recent textbooks and edited works on Irish higher education include very little, if anything, on outgoing student mobility (e.g. Clancy, 2015; Loxley, Seery and Walshe, 2014).

By contrast, there is a rich academic literature on emigration from Ireland:

- Mary Gilmartin and Allen White in particular have written extensively as well as edited collections on migration to and from Ireland (2013, 2016).

- As part of the Émigré research project, Piaras MacÉinrí and colleagues have examined the challenges associated with emigration; in particular the impact on those ‘left behind’ (MacÉinrí, Kelly and Glynn, 2013).
- James Wickham and his team have also worked extensively on graduate mobility (e.g. Wickham et al., 2013; Moriarty et al., 2015).

Broadly speaking, this literature suggests that as is the trend elsewhere (Castles, 2002), mobility decisions are not envisaged as irreversible with many graduates hoping to move back to Ireland or on to other countries (Wickham et al., 2013). Young Irish emigrants might be critical of the economic circumstances, which led them to seek opportunities abroad, but often have a positive outlook on living abroad (McAleer, 2013). The graduates among them are particularly well positioned to launch themselves in fulfilling global careers (Moriarty et al., 2015), while the ‘returners’ view their time abroad positively (Corcoran, 2010).

This body of literature that focuses on “mobility” rather than “emigration” is useful as it examines the complexities of belonging and career-building aspirations in a globalising world. Some of it suggests that mobile graduates have often been previously socialised to international mobility; and that work and life experience appear to be of greater importance to mobile graduates than defined professional and life plans (Wickham et al., 2013b, 2013c). This resonates with studies conducted elsewhere on internationally mobile students from developed countries (e.g. Brooks, Waters, and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). Some of this literature focuses on younger people and in particular graduates; but internationally mobile students remain either invisible or subsumed in other groups across these studies.

Some information on student mobility from Ireland can be collected from international sources.

- According to the Unesco Institute of Statistics, 19,617 Irish people were studying abroad in 2010 (UIS, 2012: 136).
- In 2012, 12,000 Irish students applied to British universities through UCAS.
- We also know that 25 percent of students who participated in the ISSE survey either had, or were planning to study abroad (HEA, 2013).

The HEA and the EU provide relatively comprehensive statistics on Erasmus flows, which will be examined in the next section. Other international studies

yield significant information: for instance, it emerges that Irish students are more likely to rely on their families or partners as a source of income than students in other European countries (UIS, 2009), which makes mobility and autonomy problematic. In addition, a high proportion of Irish students enrolled in British universities are from the professional socio-economic groups (Harmon and Foubert, 2010).

Although not focused on international mobility, studies of higher education students conducted at national level indicate that a number of obstacles may limit access to mobility for underprivileged students. Students from lower social classes still experience economic, institutional and cultural obstacles in relation to higher education access and outcomes (McCoy et al., 2009, 2010). Geographical distance to college is also an issue (Cullinan et al., 2013). In other words, while more quantitative data would be helpful, the existing literature gives reason to suspect that social class is a significant barrier to participation in study abroad programmes for Irish students, as is the case in other countries.

Finally, some of the critical scholars mentioned above speak to the debate on the marketisation of higher education and the emergence of the “student-consumer” in an Irish context. This is the case, in particular, of Luciana Lolic who conducted a large-scale empirical study of students’ aspirations and expectations of higher education (2016). British literature suggests that the “student-consumer” is increasingly instrumental and focused on the material benefits they can derive from higher education (notably in the form of higher salaries in later life). In this perspective, international mobility is often envisaged as a way to increase one’s human capital and employability rather than as a transformative experience (Brooks, Waters and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). In her Irish study, Lolic proposes a more nuanced view, highlighting how students long for stability and emotional security, rather than for high salaries per se. While again, this study does not include internationally mobile students, it raises questions in relation to students’ attitudes to international mobility and the position of cost-benefit calculations in their decisions to study abroad.

5 Presentation of the research

5.1 Rationale

The project aimed to address a major gap in the research on internationalisation and student mobility in Ireland. Student mobility is becoming a mass phenomenon and the object of an increasing body of research worldwide. Yet existing literature on Irish students' mobility tends to be quantitative rather than qualitative; to focus on incoming rather than outgoing students; and/or to frame the argument in terms of national economic strategic goals (e.g. DES, 2010, 2013). As such existing research fails to capture Irish students' strategies and experiences.

Ireland is an interesting case in its own right. Typically, due to the dominant position of the English language, English-speaking countries receive more students than they send. Internationalisation policy in the UK has long focused on incoming mobility as a source of revenue; but outgoing mobility has recently been incorporated to strategic goals (Brooks, Waters and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). A similar phenomenon is occurring in Ireland, with an increased emphasis in outgoing mobility in the most recent strategic document on internationalisation in higher education (DES, 2016) compared to the previous one, where out of an 80-page policy document, only two pages were devoted to outgoing mobility (DES, 2010). In these policy documents, the main emphasis is on skill-building and employability. In the 'performance compacts' negotiated between the Higher Education Authority and individual institutions,² targets in terms of incoming and outgoing student mobility are quantitative. In other words, the primary objective is to increase the numbers of students going abroad. In a policy perspective, this immediately raises the question of how this can be done. On another level, this also calls for an examination of the potential impact on equality of a strategy based on numbers.

² These can be found on <http://www.heai.ie/en/policy/national-strategy/strategic-dialogue-process>

5.2 Research questions

The main objective was to gain an understanding of the strategies and motivations of third-level students choosing to study abroad in the broader framework of international education and career trajectories and strategies.

Related objectives included:

- To outline a profile and draw a typology of students likely to engage in international mobility;
- To map out institutional practices in relation to outward mobility and to understand their strategies in the context of internationalisation;
- To evaluate the impact of environment and institutional ethos in promoting and encouraging student mobility;
- To evaluate the impact of the internationalisation of higher education on Irish third-level students' strategies;
- To explore the perceived value of international /mobility capital in the Irish context and, if possible, the effective outcomes of student mobility;

Other questions and issues emerged as the study progressed; in particular, the shape taken by internationalising efforts at institutional level. This also has implications for student mobility: Findlay (2011) argues that the theoretical and methodological focus in research on students' mobility should move away from the 'demand side' (students' desire to improve their language skills, acquire international experience, gain prestigious credentials, etc.) to the 'supply side' (recruiting agencies, universities, government policies) and how these influence student flows.

5.3 Methodology

The chosen methodology was principally qualitative. A first step consisted in analysing available data on student mobility to and from Ireland and how it evolved over time. National and institutional policies in relation to international mobility were analysed in order to better understand the context and the structural forces shaping student mobility. Further, university websites were scrutinised in order to understand the level of resources allocated to

internationalisation and mobility, with a particular focus on institutional partnerships for student exchange and how mobility was framed.

The main research instruments were a qualitative questionnaire and qualitative interviews with students returning from exchange. The questionnaire was circulated in four HEIs that accepted to participate and received 110 valid responses. It included close-ended multiple-choice questions (college, course, destination, whether participation was mandatory or not, sources of finance for the year abroad, nationality of friends); as well as open-ended questions on a broad range of topics. The questionnaire was used primarily as a scoping exercise. Its main goal was to identify trends usually not examined in student surveys. Given that students receive many surveys, a low participation rate was expected. The choice was made to make it qualitative in order to encourage detailed, reflexive responses from a small number rather than a large number of short responses.³

The 22 in-depth interviews were conducted with students returning from a year abroad (face to face) as well as with students who were still abroad at the time (through Skype). They lasted between 45 minutes and three hours. They explored various aspects of the experience abroad (including practical issues, living arrangements, contact with home, friendships, social life, travel, homesickness). Students were also asked about their motivations, previous experiences of mobility⁴, family background, studying habits, achievements and ambitions and future study, mobility and career plans. These in-depth interviews allowed students to explore their own ideas and reflect on their experiences, producing particularly rich, detailed and reflexive accounts.

Student participants were recruited from Ireland's seven universities and across various disciplines and destinations. The sample included students who had participated in an exchange programme voluntarily as well as students for whom participation was 'strongly recommended' or mandatory.

As already indicated, research on the experience of internationally mobile students tends to be quantitative. Surveys give students multiple choices or ask

³ The response rate is unknown as the international offices did not communicate the total number of students reached. Based on Erasmus data collected from sending institutions, and removing the respondents on schemes other than Erasmus, the response rate can be estimated at approximately 10 percent, with wide variations (3-60 percent) from one institution to the other. Three other institutions were contacted and declined to participate.

⁴ Carlson (2013) argues for a processual perspective, which views the decision to be internationally mobile as part of a process unravelling over time, as a way to understand not why but 'how' students become internationally mobile – hence the interest in previous experiences of mobility and exposure to culture from the desired destination.

them to rank their experiences on a scale. These surveys indicate that the majority of students report positive experiences. They tend to erase the experiences of those students, who did not have such a positive experience. In addition, international study has become a norm (Petzold and Peter, 2015). It is commonly associated with positive character traits: being adventurous, self-motivated, open-minded, adaptable, and so forth. Therefore, there is a strong normative expectation for students to be enthusiastic about their experience abroad. This makes it difficult for students to speak of negative experiences. The majority of those who accepted to be interviewed were positive about their experience, but more mixed experiences were reported through the anonymous questionnaire, as well as during the in-depth interviews.

The notion of ‘strategy’ is contested in social science. Approaches focusing on students’ self-reported motivations have been criticised because choice is not necessarily the product of rational decision-making. It is not based purely on cost-benefits calculations (Carlson, 2013; Findlay, 2011). Economic views of decision-making obscure the social logics at play, ignoring that students are embedded in social structures (class, gender, ethnicity) and that their choices are the products of long-term processes. The analysis was therefore attentive to the latter.

In addition, 10 university staff members involved in student mobility programmes in different ways were interviewed. These were recruited through personal and professional channels and included both academic staff (‘academic coordinators’ at departmental level) and administrative staff working in international offices. The study was particularly interested in the views and experiences of those engaged in interpersonal interactions with students studying abroad or considering to study abroad. For this reason, ‘frontline’ staff rather than managers were approached. The study was not limited to student strategies as the main agents in mobility decisions: It also paid attention to institutional processes and practices and to the role they play in shaping mobility decisions and experiences.

This study has a number of limitations. As it is qualitative in nature, it is not representative in the sense that the views reported are the views of all students. Students from STEM disciplines were under-represented in the sample – as they are in the Erasmus contingent in general. Students who reported negative or very negative experiences in their answers to the questionnaire rarely left contact details for follow-up interviews. Like other studies, it relies

on self-reporting and identifies perceptions at a particular moment in time. Therefore it cannot report on the actual effect of study abroad on academic success or employability, or on other long-term consequences. As already stressed, student mobility is an extremely diverse and fragmented phenomenon; in this context, the questions raised can only be partially answered.

5.4 Profile of respondents (questionnaire)

Table 1. Gender of respondents

Male	36
Female	73
Unknown	1
Total	110

Table 2. Destination country of respondents

Erasmus	
Austria	2
Belgium	2
Bulgaria	3
Czech Republic	3
Denmark	2
France	16
Germany	18
Iceland	1
Italy	2
Malta	1
Netherlands	6
UK	12
Slovenia	6
Spain	18
Sweden	4
Other	
Canada	2
Hong Kong	1
US	7

Table 3. Subject area of respondents

Arts, Languages and Humanities	44
Business, Economics, Finance, Management	12
Business/Economics and Humanities	11
Computer Science and Digital Media	6
Engineering and Science	9
Law	5
Nursing and Medical Science	2
Social Science	11
Other or unknown	8

The largest group came from Arts, Languages and Humanities; which is consistent with broader trends (see next section).

In terms of socio-economic background, a quarter of respondents received student aid in the form of the SUSI grant. This was slightly less than the average across the university sector nationally (36 percent). This is consistent with trends identified elsewhere. However:

- The sample size is too small to determine whether the population in question is significantly better off compared to the average Irish university student
- The SUSI grant is not a perfect indicator of economic disadvantage. Students on Erasmus remain eligible to the grant and the amount may in fact increase when distance to college is taken into account.

6 Erasmus and Ireland in numbers

6.1 Statistical information on student flows to and from Ireland

In Ireland, there are two main sources of statistical information on internationally mobile students: the DES and the HEA. Only incoming students are accounted for in these statistics. Both data sets are limited. A number of higher education providers outside the state sector are not included (especially in the case of the HEA statistics); part-time students and students in further education are not accounted for; credit and degree mobility are not clearly distinguished; and there is some confusion in the reporting between domiciliary origin and citizenship of students. For the year 2014-15, the HEA data indicate that 18,243 international students were registered in Irish HEIs, namely 10.5 percent of the total student population (13.2 percent for universities only). For the same year, the DES data indicate that 22,678 international students were present, namely 12.4 percent of the total (13.7 percent for universities only).

In addition, the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) keeps statistics on visas and residence permissions issued to non-EEA students. This data excludes EU and short-term students but gives an indication of possible numbers enrolled in the language school sector, who are not accounted for elsewhere. The most recent data on student migration are for the period January to end November 2014 and indicate that 49,500 non-EEA nationals were given student visas over this period to study in Ireland ‘at degree level and for English language training’. If we add the number of non-EEA students provided by INIS to the number of EEA students provided by the DES (4,801) for the year 2014, the total is close to 50,000 international students (and still excludes EEA students in the language training sector as well as part-time students in HEIs).

Finally, the *International Students in Irish Higher Education* report produced by Education in Ireland included data from independent and private colleges. Students studying on branch campuses overseas or on joint degree programmes were also included. However, this report has been discontinued and the most recent was released in 2012. According to this report 32,132 international students were registered across 45 participating HEIs, including offshore students, Erasmus and short-term students. 15,596 were full-time

students of HEIs, which still contrasts with the DES figure of 11,748 for the same year.

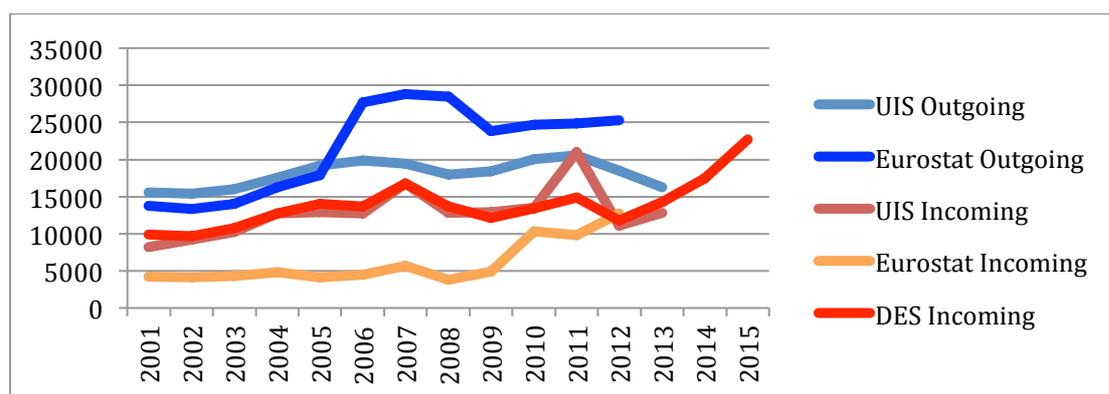
The UOE data collection, named after the three organisations that run it (UNESCO Institute for Statistics - UIS, OECD and Eurostat), is one of the main sources of international statistics on education systems. It includes statistical information on international and mobile students enrolled in any given country by country of origin. Officially, the UOE distinguishes between international and mobile students; however most reporting countries continue to define mobile students on the basis of citizenship. According to the OECD statistics, in 2013, 12,861 international students were studying in Ireland (this is lower than the 14,280 figure reported by the DES).

Outgoing numbers are as follows:

- According to the OECD, 16,121 Irish students were studying abroad in 2013. The vast majority of these (12,579) studied in the UK, followed by 1,108 in the US.⁵
- According to Eurostat data, in 2012, 25,300 Irish students were studying in other EU28, EEA and candidate countries.⁶

The next figure reports on outgoing (blue colour) and incoming mobility flows to Ireland according to UIS, Eurostat and the DES.

Figure 1. Trends in student mobility to and from Ireland 2001-2015



Given the disparity between figures reported by the various agencies, and the uncertainties regarding the methodologies used (including their consistent

⁵ http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=EAG_ENRL_MOBILES_ORIGIN#

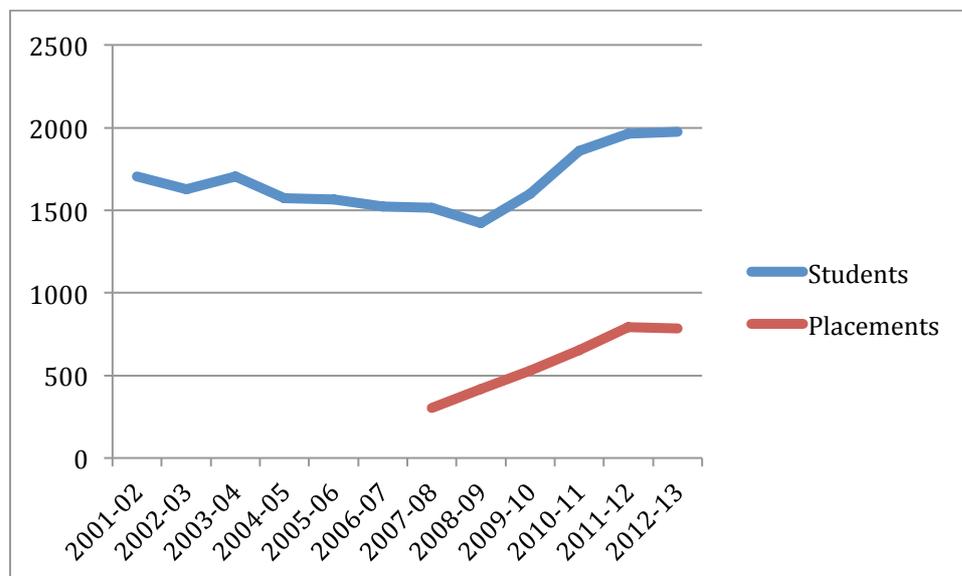
⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Learning_mobility_statistics

application by each agency) it is difficult to draw any definite conclusions regarding student flows. Provisionally, we can suggest that, once students of further education and language schools are excluded, there may in fact be more Irish students studying abroad than international students studying in Ireland. However, this does not give an adequate indication of the flows of mobile students as it may just reflect broader migration patterns, in particular to the UK. Students counted as internationally mobile by UK institutions may in fact be Irish nationals born in the UK or long-term UK residents. Nonetheless, based on the graph above, we can assume that both incoming and outgoing numbers have increased over time.

6.2 Erasmus flows

Given that reporting is more straightforward, Erasmus statistics are more consistent and reliable. Yet they do not differentiate between students taking a term or a full year abroad. The following figure is based on Eurostat figures (for both Socrates and Erasmus) for outgoing student mobility from Ireland. It differentiates between the traditional programme of mobility for studies and the Erasmus placement programme.⁷

Figure 2. Evolution of Erasmus outgoing numbers from Ireland 2001-2013

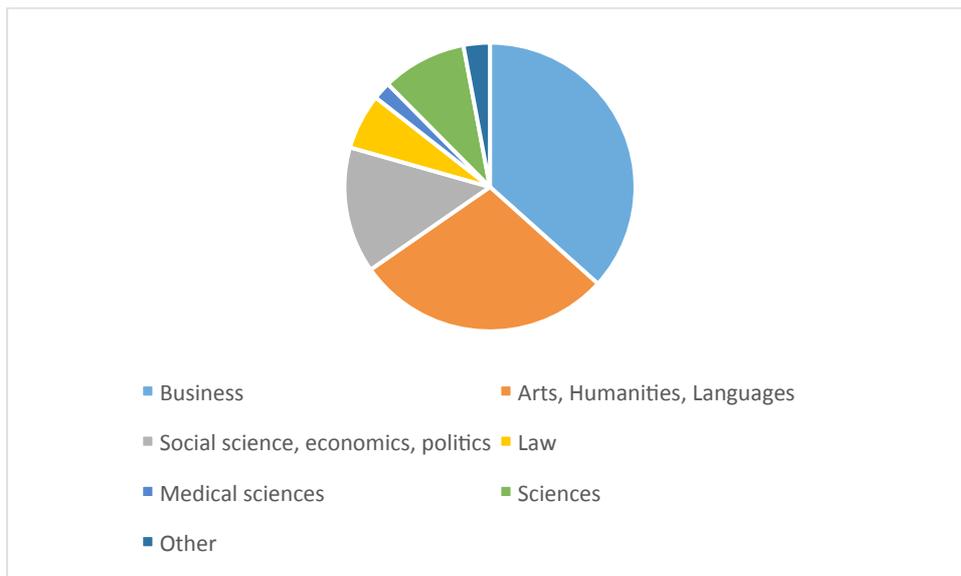


⁷ Sources: data compiled from http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/statistics/ay-12-13/facts-figures_en.pdf for 2012-13. http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/statistics/ay-12-13/annex-2_en.pdf

Overall, outgoing figures have increased significantly, in line with the increase observable in other EU countries. Detailed figures available for the period 2002-2003 to 2012-2013 indicate that the increase is partly due to the emergence of Erasmus work placements from the year 2007 onwards, as shown in the figure above. In 2002-2003, 1,626 Irish students participated in Erasmus. They were 2,762 in 2012-13 but this figure included 786 students on work placements. Internships thus accounted for 75 percent of the increase in numbers over the period.

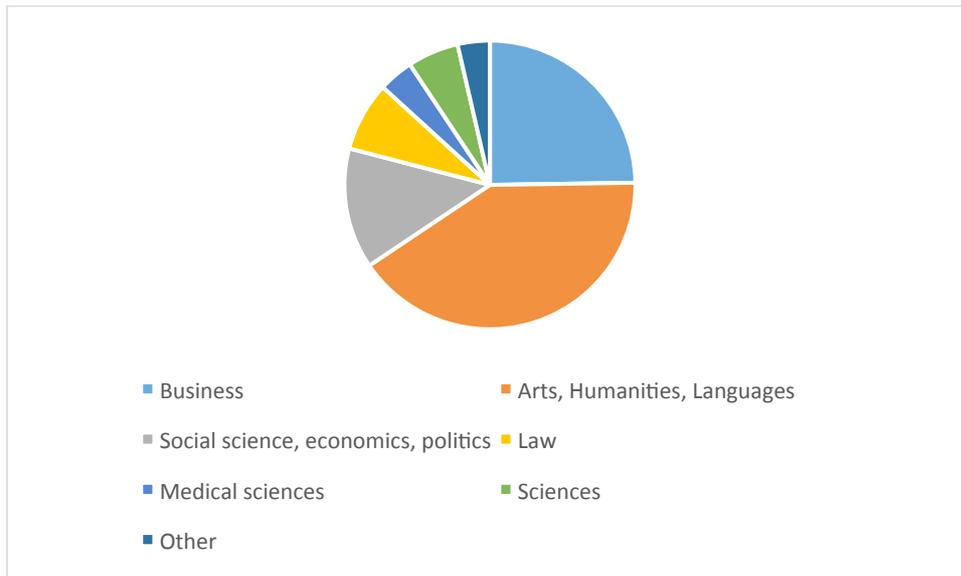
Another interesting change over time is the increased proportion of students from the combined fields of Humanities, Languages and Arts (including Journalism and teacher training) taking part in outgoing mobility through Erasmus, while the proportion of Business students has decreased, as shown in Figures 3 and 4.⁸ The proportion of students from Sciences has also decreased slightly.

Figure 3 Outgoing Erasmus students by subject area (2001-2002)



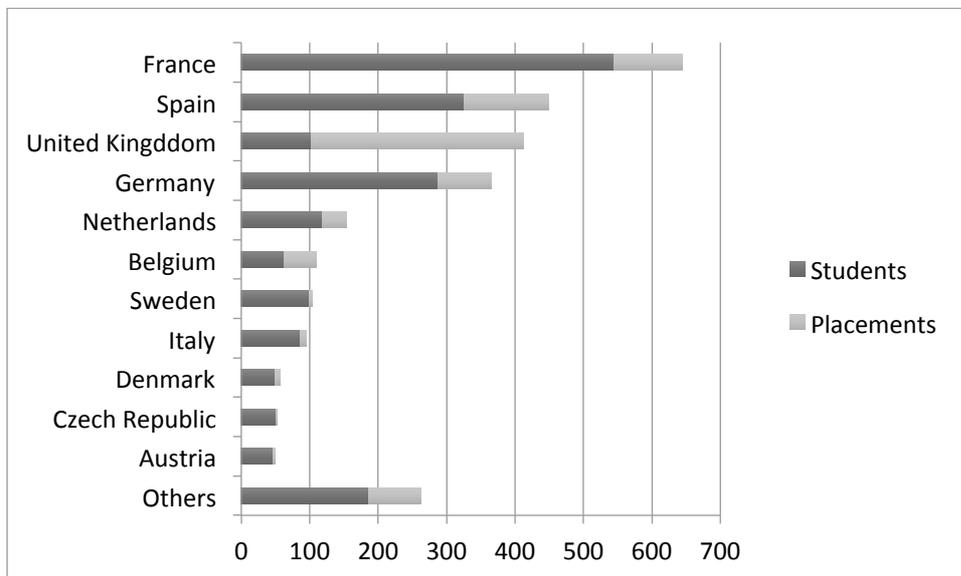
⁸ This may be due to a change in the methods used to classify students according to their subject area. Unfortunately no detailed information is available on the methods used. However the number of students studying business has increased significantly over the period; and this is not reflected in the numbers going abroad relative to other disciplines.

Figure 4. Outgoing Erasmus students by subject area (2011-2012)



There has been a diversification of destinations over time as well as some changes in relation to Irish students' preferred destinations. The next figure shows outgoing numbers by host country for the year 2014:

Figure 5. Destination countries for Irish students in 2014



Typo in table United Kingdom

At European level, the most popular Erasmus destination (for both student exchanges and placements) is Spain followed by Germany, France, the UK and

Italy. Italy is less popular for Irish students than the European average, with the Netherlands being far ahead.

Erasmus flows are unbalanced. Irish universities receive more Erasmus students than they send out (7,216 versus 3,029 under the 2014 Erasmus call [EC, 2015b: 22-23]). The situation is reversed with the UK, with Ireland sending more students to the UK than the other way round. In particular, the UK is the top destination for Irish students on Erasmus placements.

Over time there has been a rise in the number of Irish students going to the UK, Northern and Eastern Europe, as shown in the next table.

Table 4. Change in destination countries for Irish students 2001-2012

Change in numbers between 2001-02 and 2011-12	Countries
Drop > -21	Germany
Drop -6 /-20	Finland, France, Slovenia
Stable -5/+5	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Lichtenstein, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia
Increase +6/+20	Hungary, Poland, Switzerland, Turkey
Increase > +21	Denmark, Czech Republic, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, U.K.

This may be connected to the availability of tuition in English in a number of Northern and Eastern-European universities, making them attractive to students who do not speak or study a second language. This is partly confirmed by the figures presented in the next table. In this table, destination countries were grouped by language.

Table 5. Trends by language spoken in destination country

Main language of destination country	Change in numbers between 2001-02 and 2011-12
German	-70
French	-12
Italian	-5
English	+35
Spanish	+56
Other, English spoken by <85%	+82
Other, English spoken by >85%	+151

The increase in overall numbers can also be related to the growing popularity of less usual destinations. The more traditional Erasmus destinations, namely those where languages taught in Irish universities are spoken (Spain, Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, Austria, Portugal) have experienced a slight decrease in numbers of Erasmus students from Ireland. Meanwhile there has been a sharp increase in numbers choosing English-speaking destinations, including countries where English is not the official language but is widely spoken (mainly Scandinavia). In other words, destinations have diversified, with a broader range of destinations, and less obvious connection between destination and language acquisition.

In summary, the following trends are visible:

- A significant growth in outgoing numbers over time
- A sharp increase in the Erasmus internship category
- A relative increase from the fields of Humanities, Arts and Languages
- A low participation of students from the STEM fields
- A diversification of destinations in particular towards Northern and Eastern Europe
- Increased numbers travelling to destinations where English is spoken

7 The organisation of student mobility at institutional level

7.1 The policy framework

Jane Knight and Hans de Wit (de Wit, 1999; Knight, 2003b) list four different types of policy rationales for internationalisation:

- Socio/cultural rationale: national cultural identity, intercultural communication, etc.
- Political: foreign policy, national and regional identity, technical assistance, national security etc.
- Economic: economic growth, competitiveness, labour markets etc.
- Academic: institutional profile, international dimension of teaching and research etc.

As already mentioned, the national strategy for the internationalisation of higher education (DES, 2010, 2016) is framed in economic terms. The first document, in particular, emphasised the economic impact made by international students through payment of fees and spending in Ireland. It explicitly favoured the recruitment of future elites – students who would go back to their home countries with a sense of loyalty to Ireland that would later translate into FDI. The strategy aimed further maximising the economic impact of international students, both in terms of direct revenue and soft power. As already noted outgoing mobility is not central to internationalisation policy documents.

The UK faced difficulties in meeting the targets set by Europe but has since elaborated a document setting out goals and an action plan (UK Higher Education International Unit, 2013). This is not the case in Ireland. However, each institution has been assigned specific goals in relation to both outgoing and incoming figures, in particular through the ‘performance compacts’ mentioned previously.

In addition, unlike other countries (e.g. Brazil), Ireland does not have a large-scale programme of bursaries for students to study abroad. Institutions may offer such bursaries but these tend to be highly competitive. On the other

hand, the student grant system is designed in a way that facilitates study abroad for students within a certain family income bracket. When students go on exchange, their grant is not discontinued and may in fact increase based on distance. But students may fall outside this bracket and not receive further financial assistance, beyond the Erasmus grant.

7.2 Institutional strategies

When it comes to internationalisation strategies, national and institutional rationales and goals may be different, and at times, contradictory (Knight 2003b). For instance:

- Some institutions may not see enhancing ‘soft power’ for the country as a strategic priority as far as their own goals are concerned.
- Achieving a high profile internationally (which is encouraged as it lifts the profile of Ireland as a study abroad destination) may lead institutions to divert resources from traditional activities.
- National guidelines may be more difficult to apply for some institutions, compared to others. Not all higher education institutions have the same capacity to create and implement internationalisation strategies: in particular, not all will appeal to international students.

The Irish higher education sector is relatively small but it is also stratified. It has been described as a ‘two-tiered system’ (McCoy and Smyth, 2011), with universities on the one hand, and other institutions (institutes of technology, colleges) on the other. There are also differences between the seven universities. In particular, TCD and UCD offer more high-point courses compared to the other five universities. In international rankings as well, TCD and UCD are ahead of the others. The methods used by ranking agencies are questionable and not believed to reflect the quality of the education provided (Hazelkorn, 2013); however, rankings are an indicator of prestige. Presumably, they help internationally mobile students in their choice of destination. An examination of HEA figures based on the domiciliary origin of students indicates that the better ranked universities have higher intakes of international students. For instance, the proportion of international full-time students is 16.7 per cent in TCD, 15.1

per cent in UCD and 18.4 per cent in NUIG. By contrast, it is only 5.8 percent across the institute of technology sector.

It is only in the late 1990s / early 2000s that Irish higher education institutions began to develop strategic plans focused specifically on internationalisation (Khoo, 2011). International activities are now formalised and centralised, in the form of international offices and centres at each of the seven universities. The most visible centre is the one at UCD. In addition to offices, it includes a spacious 'Global Lounge', which can be used for social events. At the time of writing, according to the UCD website, the centre employed 40 full-time staff. To these can be added an unspecified number of students employed on a part-time and/or short-term basis. 12 of these full-time members of staff are located abroad, where they are in charge of promoting UCD and recruiting international students in key locations, in particular South-East Asia. This increased concentration of resources suggests that the management of student abroad (both incoming and outgoing) has moved from faculty to administrative and managerial staff. Non-EU programmes, in particular, tend to be managed by international offices.

The role of academic coordinators (faculty members in charge of managing exchange at department level) is focused mainly on intra-European mobility. As it emerged from the interviews, non-EU partnerships are often initiated by senior managers in line with institutional objectives. Traditionally, faculty would have had a greater role in initiating these partnerships and the motivation would have been scientific. This still happens, but issues of viability come into play. A member of staff in an international centre gave an example of an exchange partnership with was suggested by a Professor, based on a long-standing scientific collaboration with the suggested partner. However, this partnership did not materialise because existing partnerships with the country in question did not draw sufficient numbers and the suggested college was not particularly highly ranked. In other words, the institutional rationale for setting up partnerships may, in some cases, conflict with the wishes of faculty. This poses a risk, as it may cause faculty to further disengage with internationalising activities.

The National College of Art and Design offers a contrasting example. With about 1,000 full-time students, it is a much smaller institution, with fewer resources compared to the bigger universities and institutes of technology. NCAD does not have a dedicated international centre. Exchange programmes

are managed by a small number of administrative staff, who are also involved in other roles. These work closely with faculty. A number of faculty members are very involved in choosing and ‘vetting’ partners and it is not unusual that faculty members visit partner colleges in person. NCAD experiences severe capacity issues: most courses are studio-based, which limits the scope for recruiting higher numbers of students. Therefore, outgoing and incoming flows need to be strictly balanced; and courses precisely matched. Recruiting international students for the purpose of increasing revenue is not an option. In this particular case, the ability of the college to comply with some of the national guidelines is limited. On the other hand, this approach ensures that the pedagogic quality of the exchange is maintained. NCAD is also the institution that sends the highest proportion of its undergraduates abroad. However this highly integrated approach may not be a viable option for the larger institutions managing much larger flows of students.

In several universities, the structure of programmes has been altered at faculty or university level in order to facilitate outgoing mobility. In UL, an additional year has been integrated to a broad range of undergraduate programmes, in particular across the Humanities and Social Sciences. This additional year consists of two elements: an internship in industry in the first semester; and study abroad in the second semester. Both are mandatory for the students on these programmes, whether or not they speak a foreign language. Students may choose an industry placement abroad and thus spend the whole academic year outside Ireland.

In both UCD and MU, students may take an additional full year abroad after their second year. If they meet the requirements (which vary, as will be examined in section 5), they will be awarded a four-year ‘international’ degree instead of a three-year degree.

Both these scenarios facilitate the management of the year abroad from an institutional perspective. Whether mandatory or optional, the year (or half-year) abroad is considered as additional to the academic programme. Therefore, students do not ‘miss out’ on a year of tuition and the courses they take abroad do not need to cover an equivalent content. Sourcing equivalent modules is a difficult task, which requires faculty involvement. It is complicated by the lack of options for students who speak English only. These processes are thus simplified, allowing institutions to encourage outward mobility without investing considerable resources or jeopardising the integrity of their

programmes. In addition, traditionally, the Erasmus exchange appealed mainly to students of foreign languages and culture; removing the language requirement as well as the module match requirement allows institutions to promote exchange to monolingual students as well.

Along with the emergence of Erasmus internships and new destinations with tuition in English, these initiatives have certainly helped increase outgoing numbers, with the most dramatic increase visible in UL.

The next two figures shows the numbers of outgoing Erasmus students for each institution in 2012 (latest available detailed official figures at the time of writing), Figure 6 in absolute numbers and Figure 7 as a proportion of the total undergraduate enrolment.

Figure 6. Number of outgoing students per Irish HEI 2012

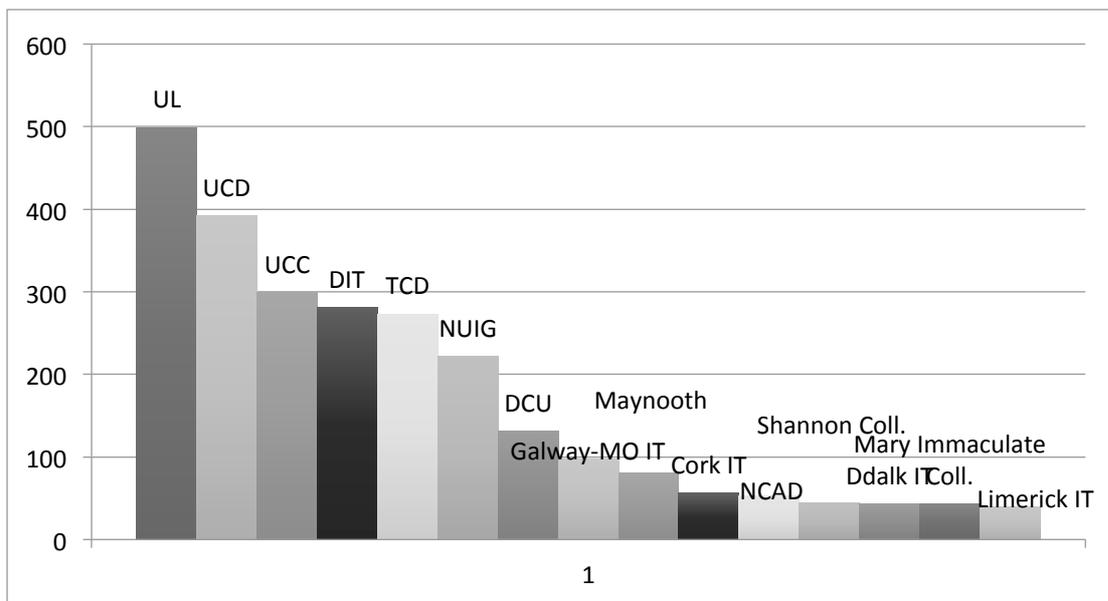
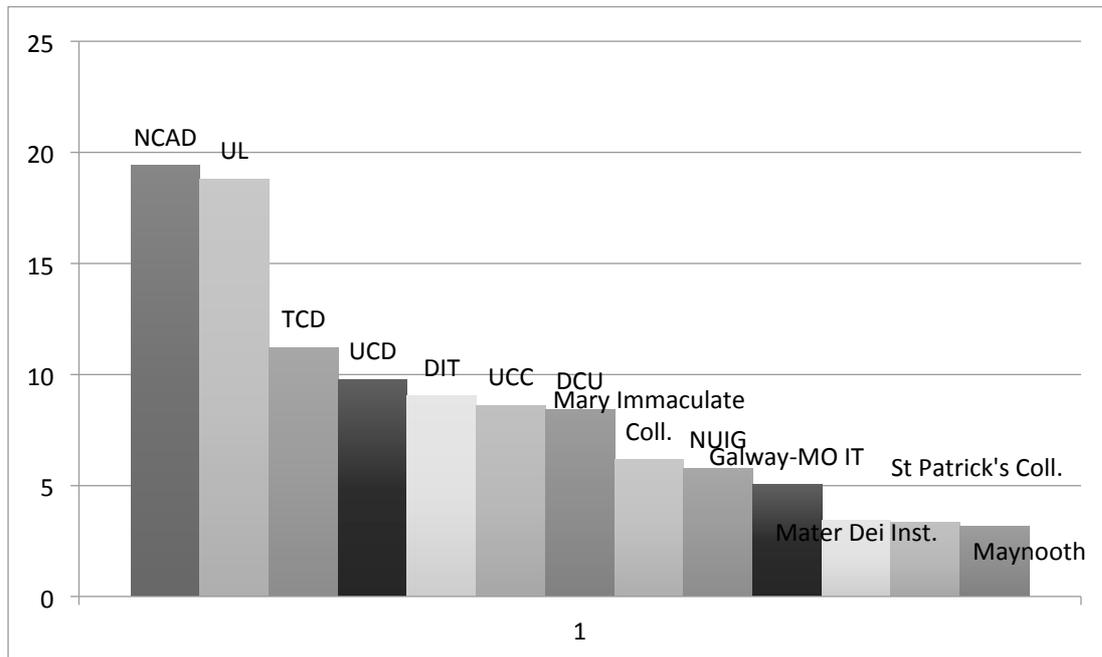


Figure 7. Outgoing Erasmus students as percentage of undergraduate student population per Irish HEI 2012



UL emerges as the strongest sender of Erasmus students, and the only one which has managed to send as many Erasmus students as it receives. This is due at least in part to the introduction of the mandatory term abroad in some departments. UL also sends a larger proportion of its students to Eastern European destinations.

7.3 Inequalities between institutions: partnerships

Ballatore and Blöss (2008) argue that Erasmus partnerships are established according to ‘selective affinities’. A ‘red-brick’ British university is more likely to partner with an equivalent university, for instance one of the provincial French universities built in the 1980s in order to absorb increased numbers of third-level students. The more prestigious, established universities are more likely to be partnered with institutions of a similar rank abroad. An analysis of partnerships listed on university websites suggests that to some extent, this is the case in Ireland as well.⁹

The next two figures make visible the ‘selective affinities’ at play in university partnerships. The 2015 THE ranking was used as it gives an

⁹ A more extensive discussion of ‘selective affinities’ and the international partnerships of Irish universities is available in a published chapter (Courtois, 2018).

indication of the prestige of universities as displayed to the public eye. On the vertical axis, Irish universities are ordered by rank in the THE, with the highest ranked at the bottom of the axis. The partner universities displayed on each institutional website were counted, sorted by country and grouped in different categories according to their rank in the THE ranking. The analysis excluded Erasmus destinations other than the UK for two reasons: First, Ireland and the UK are the only English-speaking destinations within the Erasmus programme (and depending on the outcome of the Brexit negotiations, Ireland could become the only one). As such, and as already mentioned, it is a very popular destination within the programme. Irish institutions receive many requests for partnerships from other European countries as a result. It is more difficult for Irish institutions to establish partnerships with UK institutions because Irish demand for UK places is much higher than UK demand for Irish places; therefore it makes little sense for UK universities to enter partnerships which are likely to be very imbalanced. Securing a partnership with a UK university has more significance than securing one with a partner in another EU country. The second reason for excluding non-UK Erasmus destinations from the analysis is that due to biases in the methodology of international rankings, relatively few non-UK European institutions achieve high places; most EU partners are therefore invisible in these rankings.

Figure 8 displays the proportion of UK partners in each rank bracket. Partner universities which do not appear in the ranking were counted as being in the 'over 400' category. The website of DCU did not include as much information on UK partnerships compared to the others; therefore it was excluded and replaced with DIT.

Figure 8. UK partnerships by rank bracket. Source: Courtois, 2018

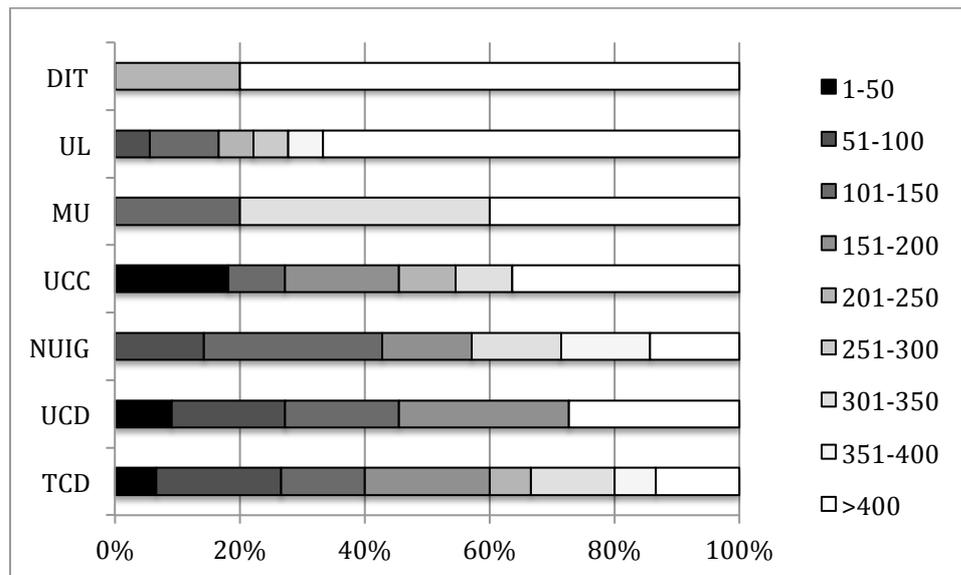
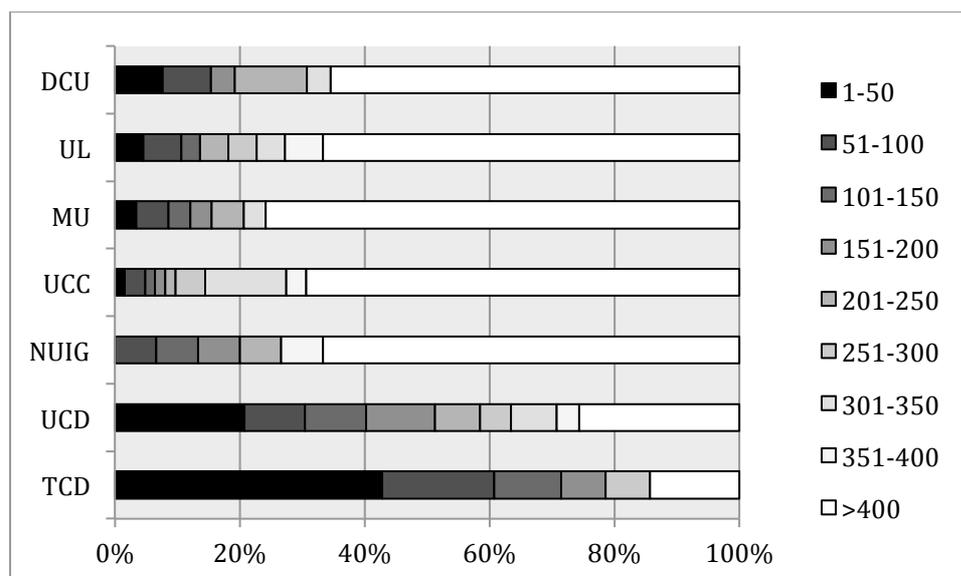


Figure 8 shows that the better-ranked Irish HEIs are more likely to secure agreements with well-ranked British universities. In addition, a number of UK partners are ranked above their partner Irish university. The case of DIT shows that there is a sharp contrast between universities and even the highest ranked institute of technology. Figure 9 examines the case of non-EU partnerships. These are not supported by a regional scheme such as Erasmus and are often negotiated on a case by case basis. All seven universities were included.

Figure 9. Non-EU partnerships by rank bracket. Source: Courtois, 2018.



TCD is not the most internationalised universities in quantitative terms. However, it has the highest proportion of highly ranked partners both in the UK

and outside Europe. UCD has fewer highly ranked partners but has a higher number of partners outside the Anglophone world, suggesting greater diversification.

These two tables do not say much about the quality of the experience offered to Irish students taking part in these exchange programmes for two reasons: firstly, as already suggested, the rank of an institution cannot be taken for an indication of the quality of courses provided or the level of support given to students. Secondly, a number of other factors come into play, such as the match between the programme at home and the course followed abroad. In addition, the tables are based on lists displayed on university websites. As revealed by interviewees working in international offices, some partnerships may in fact be inactive. Only a very small number of places may be offered or the exchange may be very unbalanced.

It should be noted as well that the partnerships displayed on the ‘public faces’ of universities do not reflect the flows of fee-paying incoming students. For instance, 16 percent of international students are from Africa and the Middle-East¹⁰ but at present there are no mutual exchange partnerships with countries in these regions. Student mobility from countries outside the European, Australasian and North-American regions is significant and brings financial benefits to the institutions. To some extent, these flows (at least from South America and South-East Asia) are also in line with the national strategy for the internationalisation of higher education, which places an emphasis on recruiting students from emerging economies for the purpose of ‘soft power’ and future commercial partnerships with these countries. However, these flows are not reciprocal and their visibility on university websites is relatively limited. This is problematic given the extent of global imbalances in student flows and what they reflect in terms of the unequal power relationships between the North and the South.

When asked about the lack of partnerships with institutions outside Europe and the Anglophone world, staff explained that it would be very difficult to send Irish students to these destinations or to other sending countries in Asia, Russia or South America. At the same time, among the interviewees, two were disappointed that South American destinations were not on offer. Several others wished there was a broader choice of destinations. Arguably establishing exchange partnerships requires significant resources and in some

¹⁰ Based on HEA domiciliary origin figures for 2013-2014.

parts of the world, student security may be more at risk than in others. However, it is worth noting that in all regions, institutions are trying to internationalise and to draw students from other countries. There might be opportunities for Irish institutions to extend their portfolios of destinations in a way that rebalances these unequal relationships.

7.4 Inequalities between Erasmus and non-EU exchange

It emerged from the research that not all exchange partnerships had the same status within Irish institutions. As suggested in the previous section, some partnerships are important because of the prestige of the partner institution. Others are less prestigious but may help extend the institutional offer for specific disciplinary fields. They may offer tuition in English and be appropriate outlets for students who do not speak or study a foreign language. They may also be located in cheaper countries, affordable to the less privileged students. But these, while useful in terms of offering places abroad for larger numbers of students, do not bring the same reputational benefits (they help build up numbers and achieve an international profile but do not allow the institution to display ‘prestigious’ partners). In addition, if they are reciprocal, there are no direct financial benefits for either institution involved in the partnership but instead may consume resources.

Further, the imbalanced flows between Ireland and the other Erasmus destinations (with the exception of the UK) put pressure on Irish institutions. As already mentioned, NCAD monitors these closely because of their programme structures, which require individual studio space and tutoring. Other institutions have more flexibility as they can increase the number of students in lecture halls (and in a more limited way in seminar and tutorial groups) without this having a direct impact on resources. But when the imbalance is significant and consistent over time, exchange agreements need to be reviewed and in some cases, terminated.

By contrast, in one case, a partnership in China was maintained despite very unbalanced flows (the partner sent students regularly but no Irish student would take up the opportunity to go there) because it happened to be a highly ranked university. In other words, some exchange partnerships may be

maintained not because they are used by students, but because they are prestigious. Whether prestige matters may also depend on the subject area: this particular case was a partnership with a Business school. Business school rankings are very influential in defining the 'value' of a degree in the labour market while this is less the case for other subjects. Being able to report a partnership with a highly ranked Business school abroad has reputational benefits for the Irish institution.

Broadly speaking, there is an imbalance in the level of resources allocated to the various types of exchange. For example, in 2015, UCD employed 23 fulltime staff for the recruitment of incoming fee-paying international students. Six fulltime staff worked on reciprocal non-EU exchange and only two were listed on the website as managing Erasmus. To these can be added academic coordinators, student volunteers and part-time or short-term staff invisible on the website. Still, it suggests the hierarchy between various international activities has an impact on the level of staff resources allocated to each. In two other universities, the physical organisation of the international office also reflected this imbalance, with much more floor space dedicated to non-EU exchange/incoming mobility. In at least one case, social events, orientation tours and other activities are organised separately for Erasmus students and for other incoming students (whether these non-EU students are part of exchange programmes or incoming only i.e. whether they bring in fees or not). Non-EU students are given access to sports facilities on campus while Erasmus students have to pay. Erasmus students have complained to the international office about what they viewed as unfair treatment but there is no plan to change this approach.

This relative lack of resources affects outgoing students as well. Two staff members, based in separate universities, were unhappy with the lack of resources allocated to the Erasmus section of international activities, which made it difficult to provide appropriate care to both incoming and outgoing Erasmus students. For instance, the university had no hardship fund for students running into difficulties abroad. In addition, the programme was organised in such a way that it did not leave sufficient time to prepare students for the year abroad. As one coordinator explained, Erasmus students are important and valued; but they do not pay fees and in the case of severe imbalances, the programme costs money. This, according to the interviewee, is the rationale

used at university level to justify allocating fewer resources to the management of the Erasmus programme compared to other internationalising activities.

Other differences emerge in the way the different types of exchange are managed. Non-EU programmes are more selective even when they are not linked to a scholarship. Applications are more complex and need to be submitted earlier in the year. In some cases, the final decision is taken by the host university after a thorough examination of students' applications. Therefore Irish universities may pre-select their strongest students, not only to enhance their chances of being accepted but also to ensure that the students' academic performances and behaviour reflects positively on the Irish partner institution. By contrast, Erasmus may be chosen as a fall-back option for those who did not secure a place on a non-EU programme as well as for those who realise they cannot afford the trip.

7.5 A loosening of the traditional exchange framework

Originally, the Erasmus programme was based on the notion of mutual recognition between European institutions. In its traditional form, the exchange was organised and evaluated as follows:

- Management of the exchange: Mainly faculty (programme coordinator and lecturers)
- Duration and integration to the programme structure: One year in lieu of a year at home university; no change to the duration of the overall programme
- Selection: Voluntary; different modes of selection but generally based on grades and motivation
- Module choice: Close fit with the programme (equivalent modules); organised by faculty
- Academic evaluation: Grades taken into account in final grade calculation

As noted by critics of the ECTS credit system (e.g. Parker and Jarry, 1998), 'equivalence' was never fully achieved. This was due to persisting differences between national systems and academic cultures; as well as to the language barrier, which made it impossible for visiting students to perform to the same

standard as local students. Leniency became increasingly commonplace as a result. More flexible approaches to organising (and in particular evaluating) the year abroad emerged.

There are now significant differences in the way the 'year abroad' is organised, managed and evaluated at Irish universities. These differences are visible within universities and at times within faculties or even departments. They fall into five broad categories: differences in relation to who oversees the exchange, duration and integration to the programme structure, differences in the selection processes, programme/module choice, duration of the programme and academic evaluation.

Management of the exchange:

- International office only
- International office in partnership with academic coordinator at department level
- International office, with involvement of faculty (not necessarily in formal coordinator roles)
- International (administrative staff) coordinator based exclusively in a specific School or Department (e.g. Business; Law faculty)
- Mainly faculty: academic coordinator
- Mainly faculty: programme coordinator and lecturers

Duration and integration to the programme structure:

- One semester in lieu of semester at home university (3-year programme)
- One semester (combined with a one-semester long internship); integrated (4-year programme)
- One year, integrated (4-year programme)
- One add-on year, optional (3-year programme becomes 4-year programme: 'BA international')

Selection:

- Competitive i.e. based on grades

- Competitive i.e. based on grades, written statement (with possibility of another assessment by staff at the destination university)
- First-come first-served basis
- Random selection
- Allocation of places on a discretionary basis or based on criteria unknown to students.

Module choice:

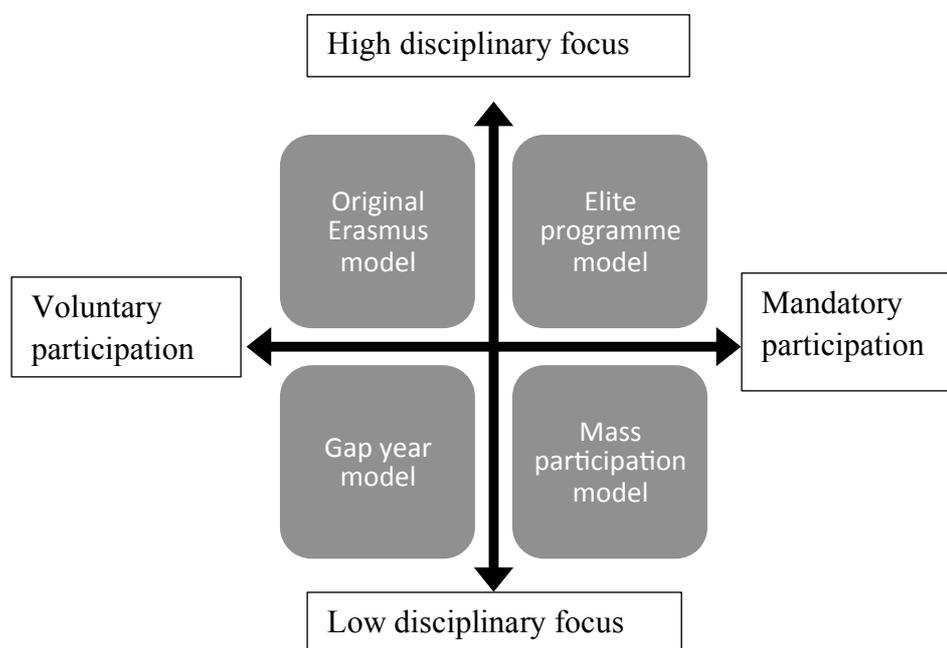
- Close fit with the programme; organised by faculty
- Close fit required but organised by students
- Flexible fit / combination e.g. one mandatory module only; choice to take module at a lower level (e.g. year 1); etc.
- Loose fit (e.g. general subject area or taught through target language)
- No specific requirement

Academic evaluation

- Pass / fail only
- Grades taken into account in final grade calculation
- Grades moderated by home institution and taken into account in final grade calculation
- Work re-examined and re-graded at home institution (rare).

As already mentioned, several universities have abandoned the principle of module equivalence by making the year abroad additional to – and somehow separate from – the overall degree programme. This is applied unevenly across departments as some programme directors (or in some cases, individual lecturers) may insist that students choose relevant modules. This diversification makes discernible a trend towards a lesser emphasis on the academic nature of the exchange and a greater emphasis on lifestyle and employability as justifications for student mobility. Figure 10 attempts to ‘make sense’ of this diversification. While various combinations are possible, four distinct types emerge depending on the level of disciplinary focus (vertical axis) and whether the exchange is mandatory or voluntary (horizontal axis).

Figure 10. Four types of exchange (source: Courtois, 2017)



The ‘original Erasmus model’ is the closest to the one described previously as the traditional approach to exchange. In this model, modules are closely matched and participation is voluntary. This model requires significant faculty involvement in order to monitor the academic content. Students follow courses abroad for a given period of time and join their own cohort again for the final year of their degree. Typically grades are transferred and taken into account by the home university. The study did not bring up significant evidence that this model was in use in any systematic way, except in NCAD.

The ‘elite programme model’ is more easily discernible in Ireland. In this model, the year abroad is mandatory and built into the programme. The justification for the year abroad is mainly academic and module choice is closely monitored. Such programmes tend to be four-year programmes with a strong emphasis on international experience. Four-year Business and Languages or Law and Languages degrees are examples of this model in Irish universities.

The ‘gap year model’ is the one put in place by UCD and MU, although as previously noted, in some departments faculty may be involved in deciding what modules students should take. Participation is voluntary and the modules

are loosely matched, or not matched at all – meaning students may choose to take modules that are unrelated to their subjects. It is an add-on year, generally assessed on a pass / fail basis and subject to self-selection. For these reasons, it is similar to ‘gap year’ common for privileged US students (Snee, 2014), although it has an academic justification.

In the ‘mass participation model’, participation is mandatory and academic requirements may be as flexible as in the gap year model. For these reasons it makes it easier to increase outgoing numbers.

Some programmes may draw from more than one model. For reasons explained previously, non-EU exchange is more costly and also more closely monitored. Such programmes are more likely to fall into the elite programme or gap year model. There are also grey areas: for language students the exchange may be ‘strongly recommended’ rather than mandatory. Overall, there seems to be a significant shift towards the ‘gap year’ and the ‘mass participation’ model. Both make the experience abroad more costly for students as they require an ‘add-on’ year that students have to finance. The ‘gap year’ model does not address the issue of self-selection, which has been identified for one of the main reasons why participation in Erasmus remains socially unequal (Ballatore, 2013). The coercive nature of the ‘mass participation’ model makes it problematic in some respects as well. It does not address inequality in access caused by disabilities, severe financial difficulties or caring responsibilities as ultimately, students affected by such issues will remain excluded. It carries the risk of further dissociating the term or year abroad from the academic content of the programme: not only because students are allowed to choose irrelevant modules, but also because in some cases there is no other choice for students as the offer of courses in English is relatively limited. When the institutional goal is to increase outgoing numbers quantitatively, the quality of the programme may be compromised unless significant resources are invested.

8 Increasing participation: risks and opportunities

8.1 A positive experience for most

Institutional support (Irish institution)

All interview participants were asked when they had first heard of the possibility to go on Erasmus. Some knew upon applying for their course that they would have this opportunity. The vast majority of those for whom it was mandatory were aware of this requirement, although there were some exceptions. ‘Voluntary’ students were not systematically informed by the institutions but had heard about Erasmus from peers or family members. As noted by Beech (2014), peer networks play an important role in mobility decisions.

Overall, students had a very good rapport with the international administrators who guided them through the application process and were very appreciative of the work of the international office at their institution. During their year or term away, they did not stay in touch with their home institution. A few students complained that they had not received sufficient guidance from their home institution in relation to module choice. The level of information and encouragement received from their lecturers varied widely. Unsurprisingly, students in Modern Languages were strongly encouraged to go abroad. In other faculties, students only heard about the possibility to go abroad from friends who studied on other courses or through personal channels. In one particular case, a student felt that his lecturers did not understand the process and caused unnecessary delays in his application. Several students reported that lecturers did not display any particular interest in their experience abroad.

Accommodation

Finding student accommodation is often a key challenge for students settling in a new place. Yet most students found their accommodation quickly and at a reasonable cost. For students travelling on their own, the international students’ residences were a welcome option. It accelerated their integration by placing them among other international students right away. Where communal spaces existed, these offered a social life, which was always available. In some instances, care was taken by the host institution to manage diversity, by mixing

students from different national backgrounds. Some students preferred to rent private accommodation. Overall, students were happy with their accommodation arrangements.

Friendships

For all students interviewed, making friends while on Erasmus was extremely easy. They quickly became embedded in several overlapping or distinct circles of sociability, which they generally navigated with relative ease. Some students went in small groups – in one case, four friends who had been studying and living together in Ireland for two years; others went on their own. Several students stated it was precisely what they wanted: to break away from their environment and meet new people; and in the case of language students, to be ‘forced’ to speak the language of the destination country rather than relying on Irish acquaintances for company (in practice, this did not always work out).

Students had a tendency to associate with other English-speaking students. The need for support from friends with a shared language and culture was present in some accounts. Generally speaking, students did not have particular issues or qualms with socialising with Irish or other English-speaking students, in particular when improving their language skills was not the primary purpose of their participation in Erasmus. In this, these students contrast with those interviewed by other researchers (Cicchelli, 2012; Murphy-Lejeune, 2005) whose explicit ambition was to socialise with students of other nationalities, sometimes to the point of actively avoiding students from their own countries.

Nonetheless, several students made a ‘best friend’ of a different nationality and language. Students made friends with other international students more easily than they did with local students; although there were exceptions to this. Where students became friends with locals, these were generally not college students but rather young people they met through sport or on nights out. In terms of the circumstances in which friendships developed, the Erasmus network meetings and activities on the one hand, and shared student accommodation on the other, emerged as social spaces central to the constitution of friendships. The Irish pub or local Irish sports team was another. By contrast, the classroom (or more generally, academic life) rarely led to the development of friendships. This resonates with many studies conducted in other countries: visiting students mix easily with other international students but find it difficult to become acquainted with local students.

Intercultural skills

Due to issues related to self-reporting and normative expectations (among others), it is notoriously difficult to evaluate the gains of internationally mobile students in terms of tolerance, global awareness and intercultural communication skills (Bishop, 2013).

A sense of ‘feeling European’ was articulated by some students in the sample. A less direct but more common expression was the willingness to work for European Institutions – although this desire was also underpinned by other motives and representations. Another aspect however was a strong sense of attachment to Ireland, which students stated was enhanced by their experience abroad – not through a rejection of the culture of the host country but by reflexions on one’s own culture when confronted to diversity.

One general criticism of the Erasmus scheme is that it does little to bring students in contact with diversity (Teichler, 2004). Beyond language and cultural differences, international students tend to be relatively privileged, in the same age group and all engaged in third-level education.

Students in the sample socialised with other students most of the time. Few had opportunities to interact with people who were not students and/or with people from minority ethnic backgrounds. If they did, these interactions tended to be superficial. However, this is not very different from the university experience in general.

When asked whether they were friends with international students before going abroad, students all admitted that they were not. The experience abroad made them more aware of the international presence on their Irish campuses and more attuned to the needs of visiting students.

Self-development

Autonomy and independence featured prominently among the benefits reported by students. For a number of students, the year abroad was their first opportunity to live independently.

Many reported increased self-confidence. Students stated they found it easier to socialise with people they did not know or to try out new activities. This was the case of male students in particular.

In terms of academic progress, students reported different experiences. However, even if they did not always feel they had learnt much, many of the students interviewed seemed to have acquired more ‘academic confidence’ in the sense that they had managed to survive in a different academic environment and/or had “one more year of writing essays”. Those interviewed towards the end of their sojourn manifested a strong motivation to achieve high grades in their final year.

Future mobility

The vast majority of students interviewed considered the possibility of living and working abroad again in the near future. In fact, a majority aspired to future international mobility, and several had already taken steps to make it a reality, by applying for internships, jobs or graduate programmes (one interview was conducted by Skype with a student who had already relocated to the UK).

Yet few were drawn to the city or country where they had completed their year abroad. Instead, students often aspired to travel further and ‘try out’ other destinations, without excluding the possibility of moving back to Ireland at some point. Across the sample, a view of international mobility as desirable and fluid dominated.

8.2 Motivations to go abroad: a disconnection between student and institutional strategies?

One of the first questions in the online questionnaire was whether the respondent’s participation in Study Abroad was ‘entirely voluntary’, ‘mandatory’ or ‘not mandatory but strongly recommended’. Separate questions were asked depending on which of the three categories students identified with. Out of the 110 respondents, 42 students indicated that their participation was entirely voluntary. 17 of these were students in Arts, Humanities and/or Social Sciences. 8 were studying Business, Accounting or Finance; 7 were in Science,

Engineering and/or Product Design and the other 10 were from a mix of faculties and courses (Digital Media, Nursing, Outdoor Education and Leisure, Law and Irish, etc.).

Out of the 42 students who declared that their participation was entirely voluntary, 12 participated in International (non-EU) Study Abroad, while the other 30 participated in Erasmus Study Abroad. No respondent in this category went on an international placement. With just one exception, all the students who took part in Non-EU exchange were among those for whom the year abroad was voluntary.

Students who had declared their participation was ‘entirely voluntary’ were asked to identify at least three reasons why they wanted to go on exchange. This question was open-ended; therefore students were not limited to a set list of options and could use their own words to describe their reasons to go. However, the same reasons came up repeatedly and were often phrased in the exact same terms, in particular ‘meet new people’ and ‘experience a new culture’. Many hoped to get out of their ‘comfort zone’ or ‘become more independent’, or again ‘broaden their horizons’, namely to evolve personally.

Motivations that were, broadly speaking, academic, also came up relatively frequently, with students hoping to hear different perspectives on their disciplines, to take modules not available in Ireland, or eager to experience different styles of teaching and learning. In both the questionnaire and the interviews, several students expressed the wish to stay in college longer, either because they did not feel prepared to enter the labour market, or because they felt they needed more time to really be ‘on top’ of their discipline. The following table gives a breakdown of the reasons listed by students in the questionnaire.

Table 6. Students' motivation to go on a year abroad

Motivation	Number of Occurrences
Experience a new culture	19
Travel	17
Academic benefits/academic curiosity	16
Meeting new people	15
Self-development	14
Credential / career benefits	14
Taking a break / escaping Ireland	10
Living abroad	8
Extra year in college	5
Improve language skills	5
Other	2

These motivations cited by Irish students are broadly aligned with those that emerged from large-scale studies of Erasmus students (European Commission, 2014, p. 72). Knowledge of a foreign language was not a key determinant either: a number of students chose destinations even though they had limited or no knowledge of the local language.

A majority of students offered a mix of reasons, which spanned several categories. A particularly reflexive student in Arts and Humanities gave the following reasons:

No.1) I wanted to push the boundaries and get out of my comfort zone setting myself the challenge of starting fresh in a new country.

No.2) Additional credits, my degree becomes internationally recognized.

No.3) A chance to study a vast range of courses that wouldn't usually be offered at my home university.

No.4) To meet with people with different educational backgrounds

Concerns for future employment prospects were not confined to one HEI or one discipline; neither was the desire to travel or meet new people restricted to any particular sub-group of respondents. However, some connections were

sometimes discernible between respondents' area of study and the reasons they gave to go abroad. A sociology student mentioned 'witness the original welfare state' as his first reason to go abroad (to Sweden, specifically); a student of Applied Arts chose Italy as for its arts and architecture. In some cases, there were variations in the way students expressed their motivations across disciplines. A student in business wrote 'to make international friends' while a student in anthropology responded 'to meet people from all over the world'.

The sample is too small to draw any conclusion from these responses, but it may be the case that the culture of their particular disciplines has influenced their aspirations or at least how they present these aspirations. While one international administrator felt students did not necessarily put more thought into their choice of a destination (and many indeed listed non-academic reasons such as weather or cost of living), students' academic and cultural motivations should not be underestimated.

Thus, students displayed specific 'geographic imaginations' in their accounts of their decision-making processes. Decisions were often very personal, expressing a taste in a particular culture, a "passion" for a language, a feeling of "belonging" in a particular culture, and so forth. Some weighted their decisions on the basis of how they perceived a place to be "international" or "really Spanish"; big and hectic or small and intimate. For all these reasons, firstly, ensuring students have full agency in their choice of destination may be productive in terms of motivation and personal benefits.

Many have voiced concern that the ongoing marketisation of higher education has altered students' subjectivities and turned students into consumers. Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion (2009) deplore that students no longer want to 'be' students but rather want to 'have' the degree that will make them employable. They are therefore less interested in the educational experience itself, unconcerned with the transformative potential of education, indifferent to the content of their subjects and hostile to intellectual effort. Several students did mention their desire to differentiate themselves from others through study abroad, and for some, this was linked directly to employment strategies: networking in the right place; adding relevant experience; acquiring a prestigious credential for employment purposes, etc. However, this was very rarely framed as the main motivation for students. In this context, the current emphasis on employability in the promotion of exchange at institutional level may be misguided and disconnected from students' motivations.

8.3 The effects of mandatory participation

Increasing participation by making it mandatory comes with specific risks. It puts pressure on international offices to find new partners, preferably in countries with a reasonable cost of living and where courses may be taught through English. Resources to monitor the quality of the experience are limited. While Eastern European destinations may be cheaper, the cost is still high to the student – in particular if they have to let go of their student job.

Slightly more than half of the questionnaire respondents in the categories ‘mandatory’ and ‘strongly encouraged’ studied a foreign language either as a major or a minor subject. The next table shows the distribution of responses to the question ‘how did you feel about this requirement initially?’

Table 7. Students’ views of the compulsory nature of participation in study abroad

	Very positive	Rather positive	Neither positive nor negative	Rather negative	Very negative	Total
Mandatory	18	5	5	4	1	33
Recommended	15	14	2	0	2	33

In total, seven students – over a tenth of the students in the sample for whom study abroad was either mandatory or strongly recommended - stated they were not happy to have to go abroad. Those who explained their dissatisfaction (either directly in the questionnaire or in the follow-up interviews) mentioned a range of issues: personal issues such as health-related or financial issues; or fears relating to an inadequate level in the language of the host country:

I didn't want to leave home, my family or my boyfriend. I also had to quit my job which was a lack of income for college. It was also more expensive than living in (town) for the semester (Human Sciences)

Due to health issues I didn't know if I could cope in a foreign country without the support of my family & friends. I even went as far as getting an exemption from Erasmus but in the end decided to go (Human Sciences)

It is more difficult for some than others. My level of Spanish wasn't and still isn't great (Arts and Humanities)

Others queried the academic usefulness of the year abroad, drawing attention to institutional issues rather than to personal circumstances:

I don't think it should be mandatory as we are not required to study a language as part of our course, nor did I study one over there. It was a great experience living abroad but technically useless as I didn't speak the language and my subjects were far from related to my course of study at home (Journalism and Media).

We weren't told it was obligatory in the course outline (Journalism and Media)

I was in a financial situation whereby I could do this year, but other students from poor families may have struggled as the grant was not sufficient for such a long time period (Business).

One student, who refused to go on exchange and was contacted by email, questioned the requirement that students of languages should spend time in the country of their target language. This student argued that not all language students wished to become language teachers and that this requirement was unfair to those who did not wish to pursue a career in language-teaching. He also argued that the year abroad does not necessarily lead to an improvement in language level that could not be achieved through other means at home.

In the sample, the 'voluntary students' had significant experience of mobility – more so than those for whom exchange was mandatory. Several of these students had travelled extensively both within and outside Europe; two were bi-nationals. Among the other group, international experience was more limited. In particular, these students had travelled less without their families. As we know, previous international experience is a significant factor in study abroad decisions. Making the exchange mandatory erases this difference and in a sense, helps tackle the issue of self-selection. However, this benefit should be

weighed against the risks highlighted above, in particular causing financial hardship and distress for students.

8.4 Limited choice of destinations

As already mentioned, not all destinations are accessible to all students. While it is important to maintain a healthy diversity in the range of destinations on offer, ideally all destinations should offer a quality experience and one of value to students. However experiences and outcomes varied widely. To begin, some students felt they had in fact little choice. The range of destinations accessible to them was limited not only by their financial circumstances but also by their institution. In some cases, while the university webpage promised a broad range of destinations, students discovered that these were only available to a limited number of students located in specific faculties. The following examples illustrate how the experience can be affected:

It's a really highly ranked engineering college, and the location is amazing. Wanted to live beside the coast, also Santa Barbara has excellent year round weather and is centrally located in California, allowing for extensive travel (Engineering, US)

This student was lucky to be eligible for an exchange scheme with a particularly prestigious partner in the US. Only two Irish universities are in partnership with this particular destination and a very limited number of places is available. This destination offered all the imaginable benefits that study abroad can offer: prestige, weather and so forth. For students in other higher education institutions and/or other disciplines, the choice may be very limited and unsatisfactory:

Cheap country meant that my grant would cover the entirety of the expenditure, as well as it being located in central Europe (Arts, Czech Republic)

Best out of terrible options (Social Science, Czech Republic)

These are two examples of students who were limited, respectively, by their financial situation and by the offer of destinations at their institution.

8.5 Teaching and learning: unequal experiences and outcomes

The extension of outgoing mobility through the ‘mass participation model’ and the ‘gap year model’, where the emphasis on module match and by extension, academic value, is reduced, opens the door to a number of issues. The first of these issues is the quality of the student experience in the area of teaching and learning. Serious issues were reported by students across the sample. Students who were dissatisfied with their term or year abroad often directed their criticism to the academic aspect of the experience. While other issues also came up (difficulties with the language, accommodation issues, financial problems, isolation, boredom), the most frequent problems related to modules, and teaching.

- Upon arriving at their destination, some students found that the modules they were supposed to take were not available: either because they were reserved to local students and fee-paying non-EU students or because the host university communicated incorrectly. This specific issue came up repeatedly and it is unlikely to be a matter of negligence on the part of all the students affected.
- Alternatively, modules were delivered as planned, but that they turned out to be at the wrong level for the student: either too easy (in particular, modules set up specifically for Erasmus students, where native English-speakers were at such an advantage that these modules presented no challenge at all) or too difficult (the opposite situation, where Erasmus students were expected to merge with local students and no provision was made for the fact they did not master the local language).
- Several students also reported that the local lecturers were hostile to them, turning them away from lectures or refusing to engage with them

Such situations caused students anxiety as they were unsure they would be able to meet the academic requirements of their programme.

Students who had managed to secure a place at a US and UK college (which is much more competitive) tended to report a better educational experience. Mixed experiences were reported mainly by students who went to mainland Europe. What follows is a sample from the answers given by students in response to the questionnaire item on the academic benefits of the year abroad:

Yes, similar content but at a higher standard. (US)

Yes. My course in Ireland is very abroad so my year abroad helped me to focus specifically on film studies and US literature. The classes are also generally much smaller and topics are explored in more depth (Media, UK).

No it was a joke like doing my junior cert again (Czech Republic)

No. Modules were unrelated to my studies at home, poorly graded and inefficient (Spain)

Many who criticised the educational quality of the year abroad still found it had helped them in some way. This was the case of most language students, but also of a business student who said that he came back ‘rested’, like after a “holiday”, and ready to take on his final year. But a few students felt that the year abroad was deeply detrimental to their academic progress:

It has not helped me academically. I arrived in [town], and the ... department at the university informed me that no classes were in English. I had to look for classes in other departments, therefore ended up studying subjects I had no knowledge of. Now I will enter my final year at my home university with a year's gap in practice of writing essays, studying my own subjects. (Social Science, Slovenia)

In this sense, the fear of disruption identified by Beerken et al. (2016) as one of the significant barriers to participation, is justified. This other student also had a very negative view of his experience and its lasting consequences:

No. It has made me resent French, and I feel that it will take a long time for me to ever want to use French in my future career. If I could drop French at this stage in my course, I would. However, that is not possible for me, so I will finish studying it until the end of my degree, and then may never use it again (Belgium).

In light of the serious organisational issues described by students across the sample, it seems that such negative experiences, although a minority, should not be dismissed as caused by lack of adaptability or open-mindedness. These

experiences have particular resonance when the objective costs of the year abroad are considered.

The grant I was offered covered very little of the stay, because my rent was so expensive, and I had a lot of money worries and stress caused by lack of money.

Although I really enjoyed my time in Winchester it was a big ask to make it compulsory. It is definitely more expensive than staying in UL and it also meant I had to give up my part time job which I didn't get back when I was back in Ireland.

8.6 Other issues

Lack of recognition of academic coordinators' role

Irish universities opened their International Offices at a relatively late stage, over the 2000s. Today these are staffed with non-academic staff often with a business and/or management background. Generally the international office is physically separate from academic departments. Academic Departments remain in control of Erasmus exchanges (to varying degrees) while non-European destinations are generally managed by the International Office. The role of academic coordinator often befalls junior staff members in academic departments. It is a demanding role, which adds significantly to lecturers' workloads: sourcing destinations, checking the quality offered abroad, selecting students, answering queries, dealing with issues they might face, and so forth. In NCAD, their role extends as far as travelling to vet the partner colleges; and some re-examine their students' work to ensure they were not graded too generously by the partner university. However the role of academic coordinator carries little career benefit. It is not valued in the same way as other administrative responsibilities in the promotion process. In addition, the academic coordinator may or may not have an international background; they may or may not value international mobility; they may or may not take their role to heart. Some international administrators expressed disappointment with the lack of involvement on the part of academic staff in some other departments.

Lack of preparation before departure

Another issue is the lack of preparation before departure. Unlike the situation in some US universities, where the exchange is fully integrated to programmes and

where there is significant intercultural preparation and goal-setting before departure; and guided reflection (in the form of reflexive reports for instance) after the stay; students of Irish universities receive very little guidance. In particular where the term or year abroad is not integrated to the programme, the decision to go abroad is pretty much an individual one; therefore there are no formal mechanisms at institutional level to prepare students for their experience.

9 Conclusions

In a context where Irish Higher Education Institutions are encouraged to increase outgoing numbers, there is a lack of research on the motivations and experiences of Irish students abroad. This qualitative study has attempted to address this issue.

Outgoing numbers have increased relatively steadily (placing Ireland around the average of participating countries in terms of outgoing numbers), with a marked increase in Erasmus internships and destinations in Northern and Eastern Europe. This reflects the fact that Erasmus is no longer considered or promoted as a destination for students of Modern Languages and potentially has a wider reach. Students from the STEM fields are still a minority. This suggests that Erasmus continues to be promoted and valued very differently across faculties.

The types of partnerships higher education institutions engage in depend on their own status in the national / global hierarchy. This would not be an issue if all institutions were able to offer a broad range of destinations and if all destinations offered a quality experience. The study suggests that this is not necessarily the case.

At institutional level, Erasmus competes with other outgoing mobility programmes. Non-EU programmes are more costly, more competitive and are generally treated as more prestigious (for the student as well as for the university) given that top-ranked universities tend to be located in Anglophone countries. An unequal distribution of resources results in a marked differentiation in the way different types of exchange are managed, with the risk that the gap between Erasmus and other schemes widens.

As higher education institutions manage an increasing number of outgoing students, the year / term abroad is taking new forms. The traditional exchange format is becoming less common. Instead of being fully integrated to the programme, the year abroad is increasingly offered as an ‘add-on’ year. This extra year comes at an additional cost to the student. The modules taught abroad are not necessarily relevant to the overall degree programme chosen by the student. This simplifies the organisation and evaluation of the year abroad from an administrative perspective and lessens the workload of faculty. While it suits

some students, it is disappointing to those who are more academically oriented. The disconnection between the academic and other aspects of the experience means that pedagogic opportunities are lost – not only in terms of disciplinary knowledge but also in terms of intercultural learning. This particular trend can be contrasted with the organisation of the year / term abroad in Northern America, where the emphasis is on disciplinary and intercultural learning, with significant faculty involvement and integration to the programme. With few exceptions, Irish students were not required to complete learning or reflexive diaries while abroad.

The study has suggested that the strategies and motivations of third-level students choosing to go abroad were relatively varied. While institutions tend to promote the lifestyle aspect and employability benefits of the experience, this may not resonate with students more interested in the cultural and academic (in a broad sense) benefits of the year abroad.

Experiences are generally positive but also very contrasted. In a sense, credit mobility offers another access to the global higher education market and some of its benefits. It is also an arena where privileged students can deploy specific strategies that will advantage them personally – although this is only accessible to those in some institutions / disciplines and with significant resources.

10 Recommendations

Faculty involvement

Faculty can play an important role in encouraging students to go abroad and in advising them. They can play an advisory role in the choice of university partners and help source partners for disciplines that are not sufficiently covered by existing agreements. Generally speaking it is important to involve faculty in internationalisation processes to avoid the perception that internationalisation is little more than a commercial activity.

- Involve faculty in internationalisation processes
- Ensure information flows between faculty and international office
- Recognise the value of the role of academic coordinators

Student choice

Students may have very different reasons for going abroad, and very specific ideas of where they want to go. The decision to go abroad and the choice of the destination are important elements in the process; diversity and flexibility are very much valued.

- Maintain diversity in destinations, formats, accommodation options etc.
- Ensure students have agency in relation to their choice of destination
- Consider the implications of mandatory participation

Quality

Significant issues have emerged in relation to teaching and learning in some of the partner colleges. While there is little sending institutions can do about other aspects of the experience abroad, academic quality is an area that requires attention.

- Invest resources to monitor the academic quality of the programme
- Collect evidence of quality issues from students and act upon them – Ireland remains in a strong position to do so (and even more after Brexit).

Equality

Because of the diversification in the types of schemes, destinations and so forth, and because of the issues previously highlighted, significant inequalities have emerged: some students may not afford an additional year of study even in a cheap country; and the year abroad may cause significant hardship.

- Reconsider the ‘gap year’ model currently in place
- Explore funding options for underprivileged students
- Consider setting up a hardship fund

Outgoing mobility and other internationalisation processes

In order to be meaningful and to deliver ethical outcomes, outgoing mobility needs to be better connected to the educational experience as well as to other facets of internationalisation.

- Consider setting up two-way partnerships with sending countries (with scholarships to encourage Irish students to take up these opportunities)
- Internationalisation at home – value the international presence on Irish campuses
- Build reflexive diaries into the assessment
- Embed preparation to the year abroad in programmes

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