The Determinants of Students' Destination Choice in Western Balkan Countries

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Abstract

International mobility of students is the key ingredient for developing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It is the corner stone for employability of students and it provides improvement of competencies and skills. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia have recognized the importance of international mobility. Increasing of the international mobility rates of teachers, students and researchers is already set as an action goal in their strategies for development of higher education. However, the overall results of EUROSTUDENT V research, conducted in 2014, showed lower mobility rates in all three countries in comparison to the other 25 countries participating in the EUROSTUDENT survey. Apart from rates of participation in international student mobility, important aspect is also the choice of destination country. The analysis of international mobility in this research investigates factors that affect the choice of mobility destination on the basis of the same EUROSTUDENT dataset. The regions for foreign enrolment were classified into three categories: EU countries, EHEA-countries without EU and non-EHEA countries. Decision and realization thresholds were analysed separately for each country and the modelling of both thresholds were performed by multinomial logistic regression models. Three groups of indicators were chosen as potential determinants. The first one consists of indicators of students' social and economic status, the second one consists of satisfactions with certain aspects of studies and the last one consists of possible obstacles for studying abroad. Overall results distinguish age, year of study and skills in foreign languages as the strongest predictors of the choice of the destination for international mobility.

1. Introduction

International student mobility is one of the key issues in the process of development and harmonization of EHEA (European Higher Education Area). Strategic goal was set in Leuven agreement (2009) to obtain at least 20% of students with experience of international student mobility until year 2020. The countries of Western Balkans have developed the strategies of internationalization of their HE systems, and they are determined to increase their low mobility rates, but it is not realistic to expect that they can reach 20% of mobile students.

Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH) have reached certain level of harmonization with EHEA, but in the area of international student mobility they are lagging behind. The main goal of our paper is to discover factors influencing student's decision process when it comes to the choice of destination country, or in other words where they want to continue their studies if the decide to go abroad. We have divided all destination countries into three groups: EU-countries, EHEA-countries without EU, and non-EHEA-countries. Students were also divided into two groups according to obtained thresholds in the process of becoming the international mobile students: decision threshold – students who decided to become the mobile student but didn't do it yet, and realization threshold – students who took the actual steps and became the mobile student.

2. Literature review

According to Eurostat report [1], "Mobile students (diploma/degree mobility) are defined as foreign students who have crossed a national border and moved to another country with the objective to study. In other words, the student has moved from what we in this context call the country of origin to the reporting country of study (also called country of destination)." Many authors like Rumbley [2] and Richters and Teichler [3] are emphasizing the complexity of student mobility and differences in definition of the phenomena in question.

Choudaha et al. [4] are underlying the significance of the research in the area of international student mobility and understanding of decision-making process, in order to develop strategies for maximizing the return on investment in internationalization. Also, it is very important to comprehend the diversity of students' population: "HEIs need to understand that not all international students are the same." [5]. The similar opinion we can find in Dustmann and Glitz [6], and Gibson and McKenzie [7].

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One of the important issues of international student mobility is that significant number of research studies in this field is based on the research on mobility in developed countries as destination countries for the majority of international students in the world. "There is significantly less information from developing countries, where the main problem is lack of reliable data about student mobility and mobility in general" [8].

3. Methodology

The data used in this study were obtained during the fifth cycle of the EUROSTUDENT project which was conducted in 2014. The main aim of the EUROSTUDENT project is to collect data on the social dimension of European higher education. In BIH and Serbia, the research was conducted by traditional PAPI (Paper and Pencil interviewing) method while it was conducted via online survey in Montenegro. Samples were weighted in respect to the available information from the national bureaus of statistics. The samples sizes, populations and weighting variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The sample size

Country	Sample size	Population	Weighting variables
Serbia	3780	238,945	gender, age, status (budget, self-financed), year of study, field of study
Montenegro	1629	23,442	gender, age, level of study, HEI, type of HEI, student status, field of study
BIH	3594	72,460	gender, HEI, student status, level of study

Summary statistics are represented as percentages. Testing differences between groups was done by chi square test. Students covered by the EUROSTUDENT research in relation to their international mobility status during studying were divided into three basic groups: students who have been enrolled abroad as students in higher education, students who have not been but plan to go and students who have not been and do not plan to go abroad. In this paper, both realised and planed thresholds were investigating in the relation to students' choice of destination for foreign enrolment. As mentioned in Introduction, students were divided into the following three groups: students who prefer EU countries, students who prefer EHEA-countries outside EU and students who prefer non EHEA-countries. Determining the factors that affect the choice of mobility destination was done by multinomial logistic regression (MNL) for each country separately on the basis of total 15 independent variables. Three groups of indicators were chosen as potential determinants. The first one consists of indicators of students'social and economic status, the second one consists of satisfactions with certain aspects of studies and the last one consists of possible obstacles for studying abroad. The selection of variables was done by stepwise method. The reference category was non EHEA-countries. The level of significance in all tests was 0.05.

4. Results

According to the conducted EUROSTUDENT research, the foreign enrolment rates in Serbia and BIH are among the lowest rates in Europe, while the foreign enrolment rate in Montenegro is closer to the average rate **[9].** The shares are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Have you ever been enrolled abroad as a student in higher education? (%)

	Yes	No, but I plan to go	No, and I do not plan to go
Serbia (N=3780)	2	36	62
Montenegro (N=1629)	7	46	47
BIH (N=3594)	3	40	57

The detailed percentages of a chosen region of realised mobility as well as for planned mobility are shown in Table 2. Chi square test showed that there is a significant difference in the chosen region for realized mobility between these three Western Balkan countries (chi-square=26.263, df=4, p=.000). Students in Serbia and BIH preferred EU countries, while students in Montenegro preferred EHEA-countries outside EU. A significant difference among countries was also obtained for a region where students plan to go to for a temporary studies abroad (chi-square=429.648, df=4, p=.000). The most of Serbian students, 65%, plan to study abroad in non-EHEA-countries, while students in Montenegrin and Bosnian plan to study in EU-countries.

Table 2: What country did you go / do you plan to go to for your temporary studies abroad? (%)

	Realized mobility			Planed mobility		
	EU-countries	EHEA-countries, without EU	non-EHEA-countries	EU-countries	EHEA-countries, without EU	non-EHEA-countries
Serbia	80	14	6	33	2	65
Montenegro	40	41	15	61	20	19
BIH	70	28	2	82	8	10

Having in mind low foreign enrolment rates of students in Western Balkan countries and differences in chosen country and planned country, we will try to discover the most influencing factors in student's choice of destination for studying abroad.

4.1 Realised threshold

Older students in Serbia are likely to choose EU countries and EHEA-countries, without EU rather than non EHEA countries. Students are also more likely to choose EU countries and EHEA-countries, without EU if they consider the following aspects as big obstacles: separation from partner, child(ren), friends, insufficient skills in foreign language, problems with access regulations to the preferred country (visa, residence permit). Students are less likely to choose EU countries and EHEA-countries, without EU if they consider that additional financial burden is big obstacle to study abroad. The year of study is only significant variable in the Montenegrin model. Master students are likely to choose EU countries and EHEA-countries, without EU rather than non EHEA-countries. Finally, students in BIH are likely to choose EU countries and EHEA-countries, without EU rather than non EHEA-countries if they are at the Master level, if they consider that insufficient language skill is big obstacle for studying abroad and if their parents both have higher education.

Table 3: Results of Multinomial regression for realized threshold

Country	Group	Variable	Odds ratio
Serbia	EU-countries	Age	1.66
		Problems with access regulations to the preferred country (visa, residence permit)	1.84
		Additional financial burden	0.72
		Separation from partner, child(ren), friends	1.28
		Insufficient skills in foreign language	1.46
	EHEA-countries, without EU	Age	1.89
		Problems with access regulations to the preferred country (visa, residence permit)	1.33
		Separation from partner, child(ren), friends	2.20
		Insufficient skills in foreign language	1.18
		Additional financial burden	0.09
Montenegro	EU-countries	Year of study	2.41
	EHEA-countries, without EU	Year of study	1.70
BIH	EU-countries	Insufficient skills in foreign language	1.52
		Year of study	3.46
		Academic background	20.00
	EHEA-countries, without EU	Insufficient skills in foreign language	1.49
		Year of study	1.13
		Academic background	9.00

4.1 Decision threshold

If we consider decision thresholds, simplified models were built. In Serbian case, only age has significant influence. Older students are more likely to choose EU countries as well as EHEA-countries, without EU rather than non EHEA countries. In Montenegrin decision model, year of study is not significant any more, while the separation from partner, child(ren), friends and problems with access regulations to the preferred country (visa, residence permit) are now the most important factors. Students who consider separation from partner, child(ren), friends as big obstacle are likely to chose EU countries and EHEA-countries, without EU rather than non EHEA countries. Students who believe that regulation problems are obstacle are likely to choose EU countries as well as EHEA-countries, without EU rather than non EHEA countries. In BIH model, only the problems with access regulations to the preferred country (visa, residence permit) have influence on the destination.

5. Conclusion

On the basis of our research results, the main conclusions are that students from Western Balkan countries are significantly different when it comes to the choice of destination country for international mobility, both in the cases of realised and planned mobility. Also, we have discovered that different factors are influencing the students' choice across countries. In the case of Serbian students, the main factors are problems with access regulations to the preferred country, separation from friends and families, insufficient language skills, and additional financial burden. In the case of Montenegro it is the year of study, while in the case of students from BIH important factors are insufficient language skills, year of study, and academic background.

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