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How to support new citizens in the new Europe: research student access to mobility

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Introduction

The paper reports on a study of the relationship between students' international experience, their attitudes towards international mobility and cultural 'others', their knowledge about opportunities for mobility and readiness to participate in mobility projects. Readiness for participation in international mobility programs is considered to be the key factor in shaping individual identity and fostering the development of the sense of European citizenship.

Mobility and the European Union

There are attempts in EU educational policy to create a shared paradigm for comprehensive education, that would influence the process of generating Europe as a cultural and mental fact. There is also a desire to enable young Europeans to get to know others through international experiences in education and to establish compatible and comparable national educational systems that will make participation in education in other countries possible.

Mobility has become a buzzword in education, labour market and political processes. It addresses the very interesting phenomenon of moving objects (people, but also goods) and requires a certain characteristic of mental readiness for change, openness for contacts and transformations, and the ability to develop. It is believed that in the post-modern world mobility is a desirable value. However, there are numerous obstacles to mobility: legal constraints, financial burdens, bureaucracy, but also personal attitudes, beliefs and inefficient competencies.

Example of an educational project promoting mobility

The main goal of the Transit project was to develop courses providing particular staff (mobility advisors, career centres' officers, international co-operation institutions' employees) with the skills and knowledge necessary to support people willing to travel to gain their first vocational or further educational experience in different cultural context.

In the experimental phase of the Transit project, the university students participating in the course expressed different opinions when asked if they would participate in international mobility programmes. Their opinions ranged from enthusiastic agreement with international experiences to a total denial of the value of such opportunities. This led to the research question of this study: what factors determine the level of readiness for international mobility?

The research hypothesised that readiness for international mobility depended on previous international and intercultural experiences, on knowledge about international opportunities, and on attitudes to cultural diversity and to cultural others.

Methodology

For the purpose of the study a questionnaire was developed covering the following: previous experience in international context, attitudes towards cultural others, knowledge about mobility opportunities, and readiness to commit to such an initiative. Eighty subjects participated in the study, all students of Krakow tertiary education institutions, but at different points in their academic careers.

The dependent variable used in the study, defined as the readiness to use opportunities to participate in mobility, was measured by three indicators: (1) the level of declared willingness to go abroad to study or for an internship, (2) general opinions / convictions about the results of foreign experiences, and (3) the expectations of respondents' personal mobility.

Basing on the general thesis outlined above, four working hypotheses were elaborated:

1. a high level of respondent's experience of working in common with representatives of other cultures or nations increases readiness for mobility.
2. the higher the subjects' declared level of knowledge about opportunities for international mobility, the higher their level of readiness for mobility.
3. deeper conviction about the value of international mobility programs increases readiness for mobility.
4. there is a positive correlation between attitudes to cultural others and the readiness to participate in mobility projects.

These hypotheses were falsified through checking the main dependent variable against independent variables like:

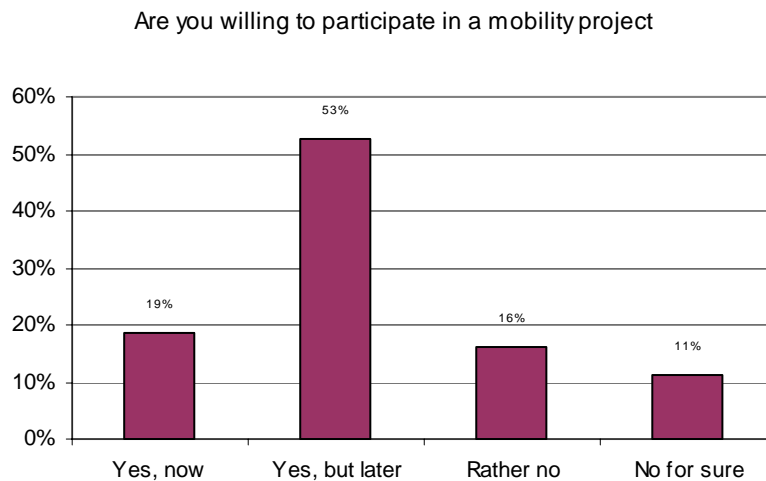
- the context of the interactions with representatives of other cultures (hypothesis 1);
- personal experience in work in multicultural group (hypothesis 1);
- declared level of knowledge about opportunities for mobility (hypothesis 2);
- the ability of practically managing the subjects' mobility projects (hypothesis 2);
- the level of evaluation of international and cross-cultural experience (hypothesis 3);
- the reasons for committing to participation in mobility programmes (hypothesis 3);
- the declared ability to co-operate with culturally others in work or educational settings (hypothesis 4);
- the declared freedom from cultural stereotypes and prejudices (hypothesis 4).

Results

The dependent variable, readiness for participating in international mobility programmes, was tested with three indicators. The first one, the level of declared willingness for going abroad to start study or internship, was tested by a closed question

asking whether the subject, if offered the possibility of participating in such a programme, would participate in it immediately, would rather do it in the near future, would reject the offer, or would not be interested in such an opportunity. The majority of subjects declared the readiness to participate either at once (19%) or in the near future (53%), 16% would rather reject the offer, while only 11% would definitely not be interested in mobility programmes.

Figure 1: The level of readiness to participate in the international mobility programmes



The other two indicators were tested through open questions. The question about general opinions / convictions about the results of foreign experiences, and the question about the expectations of respondents' personal mobility results gave answers falling into eight categories (Table 1).

Interesting differences appeared when a condition of the subjects' reasoning was changed: instead of speculating about the possible outcomes of studying or internship abroad in a general fashion, they were asked to think about what could happen to them personally if they used such an opportunity. Possible personal outcomes of foreign experiences more often included educational and professional developmental outcomes and entertainment, and gave less often personality development and second language improvement. One category appeared only while talking about possible personal results: experiencing negative emotions as fear, loneliness, homesickness, and troubles.

Table 1: Percentages of categories of subjects' opinions about the general and personal results of international and cross-cultural experiences

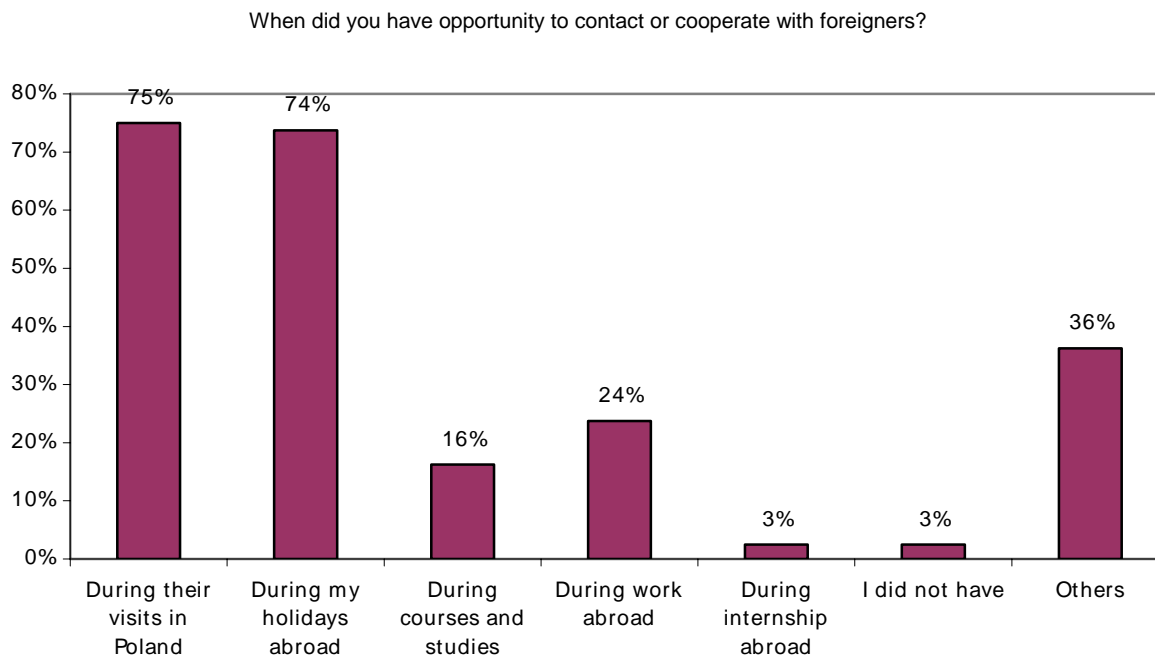
Category	Results general	Results personal
Education and professional development	16%	30%
Personality development	10%	6%
Second language acquisition and development	41%	13%
Cultural and interpersonal experience	20%	13%
Entertainment	1%	18%
Earning money and improvement of life conditions	6%	6%
Experiencing negative emotions and troubles	0%	14%
I don't know	3%	0%

Experiences of work and education in intercultural context

The first hypothesis assumes that subjects' experience in working with representatives of other cultures or nations increases their readiness for participation in mobility project. The independent variable, experience of work in multicultural group, measured by the question exploring the frequency of such situations in subjects' experience was correlated with the dependent variable, the level of readiness for participation in potential mobility project. The statistical analyses proved that there is no correlation between those two variables (-0.04716). It seems that young people decide about their involvement in the mobility project regardless of their previous experience of work in a multicultural group.

Supportive evidence for this finding is yielded by another question that explored the character (context) of the previous encounters with foreigners. The majority of subjects claimed that they had opportunities to familiarise with cultural others on casual occasions: during foreigners' visits to Poland or during the subjects' holidays abroad. The data suggest that the subjects significantly lacked the international and cross-cultural experience useful in work, co-operation or study. Only 3% of subjects declared that they had such chance during internship and 16% during studies. Interestingly 24% of subjects admitted that they had been working abroad (which does not mean that they worked in culturally diverse groups).

The lack of correlation between the amount of experience in working in multicultural groups and the readiness for participation in mobility projects, supported by the fact that the majority of experiences had been gained from accidental interactions during holidays, suggests that decisions about participating in mobility projects might not be taken rationally by many tertiary education students in Poland. It appears that these young people did not analyse their previous experience in relationships with possibly participation in mobility projects, and they also lack proper experience in work or educational settings (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The circumstances of participants' international experiences

It is also not clear for what reasons the subjects decided to participate in mobility projects. Although huge enthusiasm for it was not detected, it still appears that the subjects were strongly convinced that they would like to participate in the future.

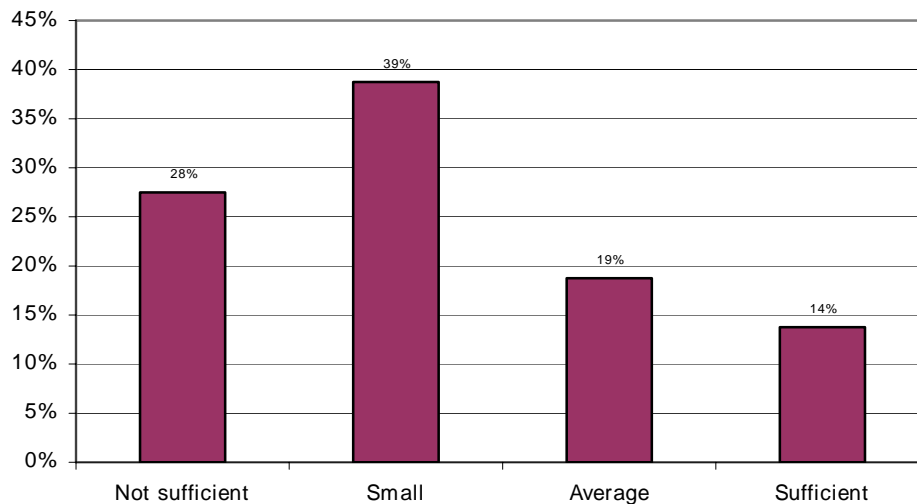
There is a strong demand for educational programs to prepare students and young professionals for travelling abroad with professional aims. However, the lack of proper preparation for educational and professional opportunities in international and cross-cultural contexts may be conceived of as both disadvantage and advantage. As an advantage, it may be perceived as a chance to create a new system of education established for a population that has no strong stereotypes.

Knowledge about mobility

The second hypothesis of this study is that the subjects' high declared level of knowledge about the opportunities for international mobility correlates positively with the high level of readiness for participation in mobility programs.

The rationale for this hypothesis was an assumption that a high level of knowledge will decrease the level of uncertainty and this, in turn, will result in an increased level of willingness to participate in international experiences. Unfortunately, statistical analyses showed no significant correlation between these two variables – the level of knowledge about mobility and the readiness for participation in mobility projects.

It is again interesting that there is no negative impact on the willingness to participate in mobility because of lack of knowledge, and no positive impact as a result of being so informed. 67% subjects assess their knowledge in this area as insufficient or small, another 19% describe it as mediocre. Only 14% subjects claim that their knowledge about mobility project is sufficient, but this has no correlation with the readiness for mobility (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Participants' knowledge about mobility opportunities

Attempting to understand those results, we realised that this attitude shows only motivation to go somewhere. The main value here is travelling, without reflection why they are going there, or what they might gain from it. Journeying is a value itself.

The student population taking part in this research might be seen as uninformed optimists. Of course the 'real' level of their knowledge was never examined, but in their opinion they had a lack of information. Nevertheless, they are still willing to go.

Contradictory results are provided from a more specific question, about the ability to manage their own personal mobility project. Answers to this question might be grouped in three almost equally distributed categories – 29% of the subjects evaluated their skills in this area highly. They agreed that they will not have any problems in preparing and managing their mobility projects. On the opposite end there were 31% of subjects who claim that they did not know how to be involved in mobility. They did not agree with the sentence that they are able to manage their mobility. The remaining 37% of subjects were not sure about their skills regarding managing their own mobility.

This is interesting that only 14% of subjects believe that they have sufficient knowledge, but 29% of them have strong conviction that they are able to manage their mobility project. This may be caused by the lack of experience; having very few opportunities to learn what pitfalls and difficulties are inherent to studying and working in an unfamiliar cultural context, the subjects display positive assessments of their own abilities to deal with mobility.

Value of international experience

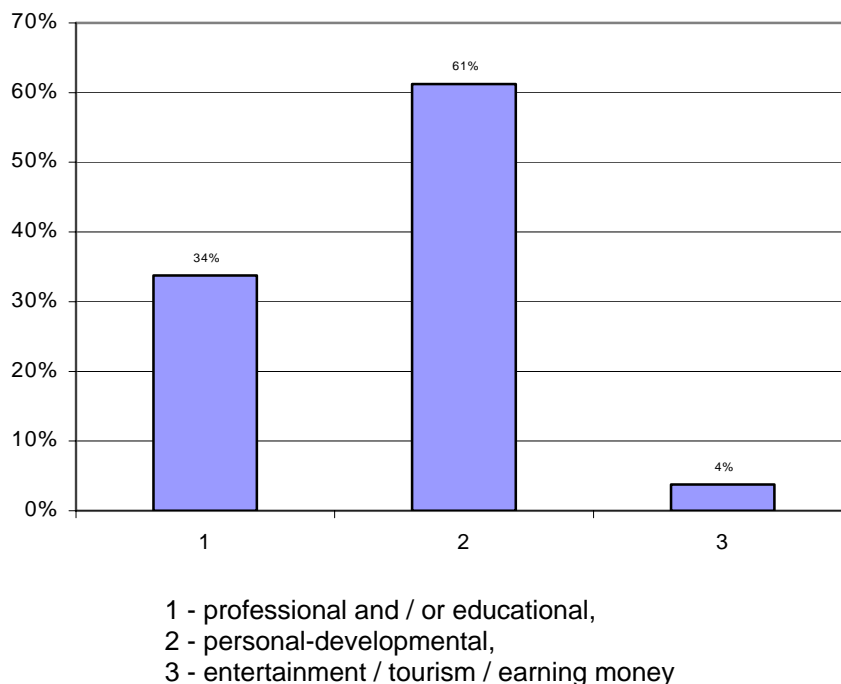
The third hypothesis claimed that a stronger conviction about the high value of international mobility programs increases the readiness for mobility.

The statistical analysis proved that there was no correlation between the independent and dependent variable. This means that the evaluation of the value of international

mobility programmes is not related to readiness to participate in mobility projects. Decisions about undertaking the opportunity of international and cross-cultural experience are probably taken without reference to the value of the mobility projects as such. There must be some other factors that influence this decision-making process. This is in line with the results of the two previous analyses; having not enough experience gathered in international and cross-cultural work or educational contexts and having not sufficient knowledge about the mobility projects the subjects ground their relatively high evaluation of mobility with other means.

The qualitative analysis of open questions exploring the subjects' rationales for mobility reveals that the reasons presented by the subjects fall into three broad categories: professional and/or educational (34%), personal-developmental (61%) and entertainment/tourism/earning money (4%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Subjects' rationales for evaluation of mobility



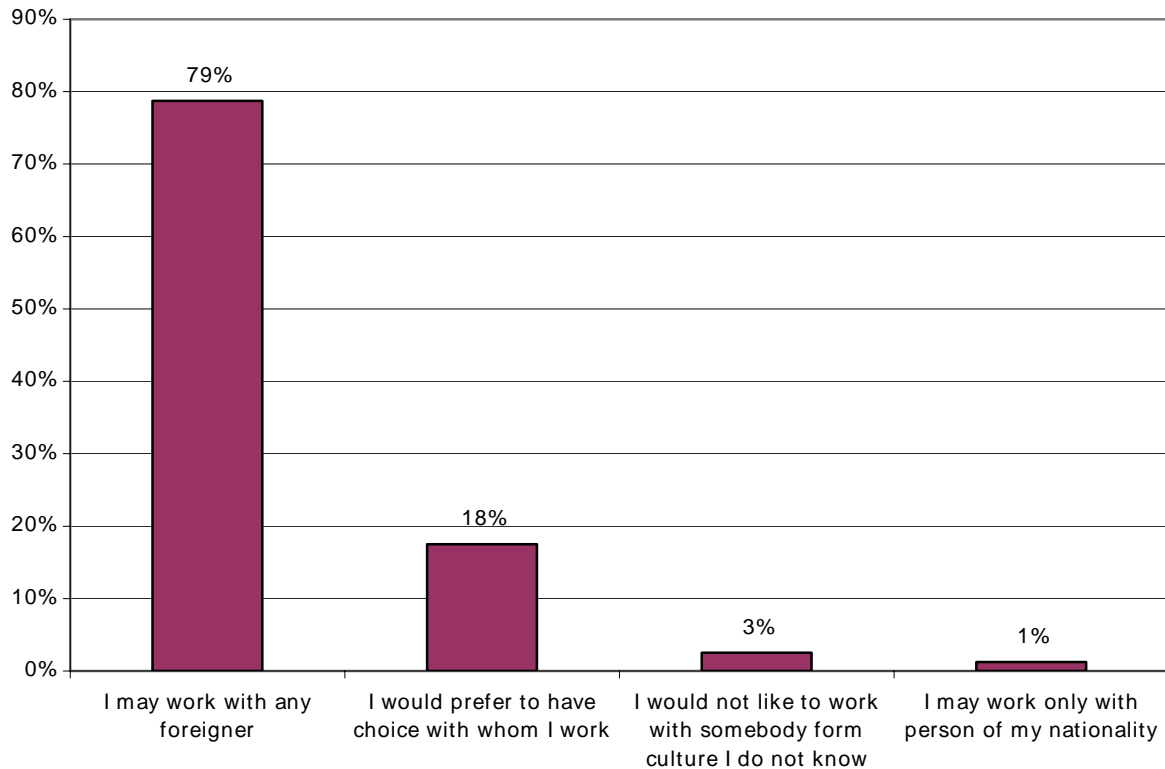
It appears that mobility projects are mostly attractive to subjects as an opportunity for further personal development rather than an opportunity for education and professional development. Taking into account the relatively young age of the subjects (early twenties) it may be argued that such thinking about international mobility is in line with major developmental tasks that are to be solved in this period of life.

Attitudes to culturally others and the readiness for mobility

Finally, the hypothesis about the relationship between positive attitudes to cultural others and the readiness to participate in mobility projects was tested. Once again the statistical analysis yielded no correlation between the two variables. However, the results appear rather optimistic: 79% of subjects declared that they could co-operate

with anyone regardless of his/ her nationality or cultural background. 18% would prefer to have the possibility to choose the person according to his/her national and/or cultural background and only 4% displayed some objections if they were faced with the necessity to work together with cultural others (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Subjects' attitudes towards culturally others



The open question exploring the rationale for these declarations showed that the majority of students (71%) in some way deny the relevance of cross-cultural differences to the context of work or education. Equally distributed in the sample were two other rationales: existing cross-cultural differences that should be taken into account in culturally diverse work or educational environment (14%) and open reference to stereotypes and/or prejudices (15%). On the other hand, the first and the third category of rationales (in sum 86% of the subjects) may be interpreted as not very favourable for future international and cross-cultural co-operation. Both the prejudices and the denial of existing cultural differences, not reflecting social reality, do not promise success in real life settings. Again, the subjects lack of international and cross-cultural experience, and their focus on personal developmental rather than educational professional issues, may explain this result.

As the final step of data analysis, the qualitative comparison of the question exploring the subjects' rationales for evaluation of mobility and two questions exploring the subjects' opinions about the general and personal results of international and cross-cultural experiences was performed. For the purpose of this comparison the categories presented in Table 1 were collapsed into four more general ones. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The percentages of categories of subjects' rationales for the value of international mobility, expected general results, and expected personal results of international and cross-cultural experience

No.	Category	Mobility value	Results general	Results personal
	Professional and / or educational	34%	16%	30%
	Personal-developmental	61%	72%	46%
	Entertainment / tourism / earning money	4%	7%	24%
	I don't know	0%	3%	0%

In all three questions, the highest percentages of answers fall into the second category of personal developmental issues. This confirms the results reported above, suggesting that subjects in this study were more likely to see the international and cross-cultural educational and professional mobility programmes as opportunities for personal development than for professional development.

Conclusions

The study reported in this paper dealt with the issue of college students' readiness to participate in mobility programmes aimed at education and fostering professional development. The results of data analyses suggest the following conclusions.

The subjects demonstrated not very sophisticated levels of reasoning and reflection on the issues of international and cross-cultural aspects of work and education. This probably results from not having had sufficient previous experiences, most of which were limited to causal situations during vacations abroad or during encounters with foreigners in the home country.

- The subjects seem to be well aware of the limitations of their knowledge in using the opportunities offered by international mobility programmes. Again, these limitations probably result from the subjects' insufficient previous experiences.
- The subjects express their readiness to participate in mobility programmes and they highly value the possible outcomes of such endeavours. However, they mostly see mobility as an opportunity for personal development rather than for professional one.
- The high level of readiness for using the mobility programmes combined with the relatively low level of knowledge and experience may result in problems and difficulties of different kinds once the subjects engage in mobility.
- It needs to be stressed that the sample used in this study consisted of college level students, mostly at university. The results would probably be less encouraging if the sample consisted of non-tertiary education subjects.

The study suggests the urgent need to develop and widely disseminate educational programmes like the one elaborated within the framework of the Transit project. Without proper preparation, it will be very difficult to promote European citizenship and values through international mobility programmes.

