

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is based on a two-year study entitled 'The Significance of International Student Mobility in Students' Strategies at Third Level in Ireland' conducted under the NUI Dr Garret FitzGerald Post-Doctoral Fellowship for the Social Sciences. A number of academic papers based on this study have been published (Courtois, 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b) and two additional papers are 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 about 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 principally qualitative methodology. It was based on documentary research, a questionnaire and in-depth interviews with staff and students engaged in outgoing mobility or returning from a sojourn abroad.

According to the study, outgoing student mobility brings a number of benefits at individual, institutional, national and regional levels:

- Students reported 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 were more aware of the international presence on their campuses. Potentially, this can help improve the experience of incoming international students.
- Mixed or negative experiences of the support structures at continental universities made students more appreciative of their home institution. Returning students reported being inclined to recommend their university to potential incoming students.
- Several students reported being inclined to promote Irish culture and their home country in general.
- Students developed a deeper understanding of the European project and several were 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 of these students still report having a positive experience.

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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 and support services at their host university.
- The main source of dissatisfaction was with 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 international 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 (where a three-year degree becomes a four-year 'international' degree by the addition of an academic year abroad) 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 place a high value on academic and cultural learning and have high expectations in this respect. These expectations are not always met.



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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 programmes compared to others, and by the limited access that some students have to specific programmes.

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, who are currently underrepresented in exchange programmes
- To consider the implications of the growing stratification of exchange destinations for equality in higher education
- To address the risk of faculty being left out of, or becoming disengaged from the organisation of mobility programmes and other internationalising activities
- To ensure that economic rationales do not dominate internationalising activities as this carries a risk of compromising scientific and cultural benefits, and has implications for equality and diversity.

Structure of the report

Section 2 presents the background to the study, with a particular focus on definitions and relevant literature. Section 3 gives an overview of available statistical information on student mobility to and from Ireland. Next, Section 4 describes the research undertaken, including a summary of participants' profiles. Section 5, based principally on interview data, gives an overview of students' motivations and experiences and highlights the issues that need to be addressed to improve the student experience abroad. Section 6 focuses on institutional approaches to outgoing student mobility, with a discussion on the disparities from one institution and one programme to another, as well, as on how the organisation of exchange programmes has changed over time. Section 7 presents the main conclusions and Section 8 proposes recommendations for the attention of educators, higher education managers and policy-makers.