

# Student Mobility and International Cooperation

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**Abstract.** *Student mobility and exchange programmes are becoming an important part of an effective student learning environment in terms of enhancing their communication competences in an international environment as well as increasing competitiveness for further labour markets.*

*The main aim of this research is to determine the positive aspects of mobility and the problems that face students. Research was conducted among incoming and outgoing students and staff at international relations offices. Respondents were from three Universities in Austria, Ireland and Croatia. Feedback was collected by survey designed for the purpose of this research. Student opinion was compared with feedback from the International Office's staff.*

*Students emphasised the importance of international relation offices in terms of providing information, helping in problem solving and decision making. They reported problems with paper work and credit transfers. Mobility benefits are a development of social skills, networking and self confidence.*

**Keywords.** Student mobility, international collaboration, international environment.

## 1 Introduction

'International collaboration of universities refers to the development of international relations with partner institutions in the world, encouragement of the mobility of students, teachers and non-teaching staff, and participation in international programs and projects in the field of higher education' [1]. 'The term "academic mobility" refers to the visit of higher education students or teachers to another higher education institution for the purpose of study or work' [2].

Academic mobility brings positive changes on 3 different levels:

- Individual level - provides individuals with the experience of working and living in a different environment;

- Institutional level - mobile students and teachers are the driving force of new ideas and contacts which has an influence on strengthening international collaboration and the development of networks in higher education and enables the exchange of scientific experience and findings, thus creating conditions for the development of innovation and competitiveness in higher education;

- broader social level - shaping the culture of mutual understanding and tolerance and promoting the dialogue and cooperation among different social groups' [2].

Student mobility is becoming an important part of the process of acculturation, through which students acquire new approaches, beliefs and values by coming into contact with other cultures [3, pp 93].

Mobility can also be an important experience for future work place and carrier development. It enables them to face different types of diversity regarding race and ethnicity, regional and national origin, age, sexual orientation, physical ability and gender or social class [4, pp 40].

The advantages of students with international experience could be of interest to the business sector regarding their social competences and better recognizing the variations in the diverse world [5, pp 66].

In the European Union, the biggest programme in the field of education which encourages mobility and international collaboration is the Lifelong Learning Programme [6]. It consists of four sub-programmes which fund projects at different levels of education and training:

- Comenius for schools

- Erasmus for higher education
- Leonardo da Vinci for vocational education and training
- Grundtvig for adult education.

Other projects in areas that are relevant to all levels of education, such as language learning, information and communication technologies, policy co-operation and the dissemination and exploitation of project results are funded through the “transversal” part of the programme. In addition, the programme includes Jean Monnet actions which stimulate teaching, reflection and debate on European integration, involving higher education institutions worldwide’ [7].

‘ERASMUS is the European Union’s flagship “mobility” programme in education and training and one of the best-known EU-level actions. It was established in 1987 and since then has enabled more than 2 million students from across Europe to pursue enriching learning experiences in other countries’ [8]. ‘These experiences give students a better sense of what it means to be a European citizen’ [9].

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Measurement

Survey was conducted among 3 International offices and incoming and outgoing students of three universities: the University of Zagreb, Karl-Franzens University of Graz and University College Cork during 2012 (February-July). The survey of international offices consisted of 18 open-ended questions. The survey for students consisted of 36 closed and open-ended questions and was done online - link to the students was sent via email.

### 2.2 Respondents

The target population consisted of students who participated in student mobility. 336 students responded and were divided into 6 groups: the University of Zagreb-incoming students (N=29), the University of Zagreb-outgoing students (N=38), Karl-Franzens University of Graz-incoming students (N=64), Karl-Franzens University of Graz-outgoing students (N=44), University College Cork-incoming students (N=124) and University College Cork-outgoing students (N=47). (Seven students from the University of Zagreb went to

Karl-Franzens University of Graz and three from Karl-Franzens University of Graz went to the University of Zagreb so their answers were put into two groups – both as incoming and outgoing students so that in total there were 346 responses).

Beside students, International offices were also targeted (N=3).

In the University of Zagreb-incoming students group, 75.86% were female and 24.14% were male while in the University of Zagreb-outgoing students group, there were 60.53% of female students and 39.47% male. When it came to the Karl-Franzens University of Graz incoming students group, 68.75% were female and 31.25% were male. In the outgoing group there were 88.64% of female students and 11.36% male. In the University College Cork-incoming students group there were 74.19% female and 25.81% male. In outgoing 72.34% were female and 27.66% male.

The respondents were mainly 20-24 years old (78.9%) and 21.1% were 25 or older.

## 3 Results and Interpretation

### 3.1. International offices

The University of Zagreb in Croatia has 65000 students. In 2011/2012 they had 182 incoming and 377 outgoing students.

Karl-Franzens University of Graz in Austria has 30000 students. Yearly they have around 750 incoming and 750 outgoing students.

University College Cork in Ireland has 18800 students. Each year they have around 500 incoming and 200 outgoing students.

Between the questions that were given to International offices and answers they gave, the most significant are ones concerning their experience with both incoming and outgoing students.

As shown in Table 1, we can see that all three offices had good experience with both groups of students (incoming and outgoing) and they noticed positive changes on them once mobility took place. Feedback was based on open ended questions.

When it comes to problems, all three offices have answered that students come to them regularly with their problems (incoming: problems with ECTS credits, courses, visas; outgoing: communication problems at host university, accommodation problems, problems with courses).

**Table 1 Experience of International Offices / Open Ended Questions**

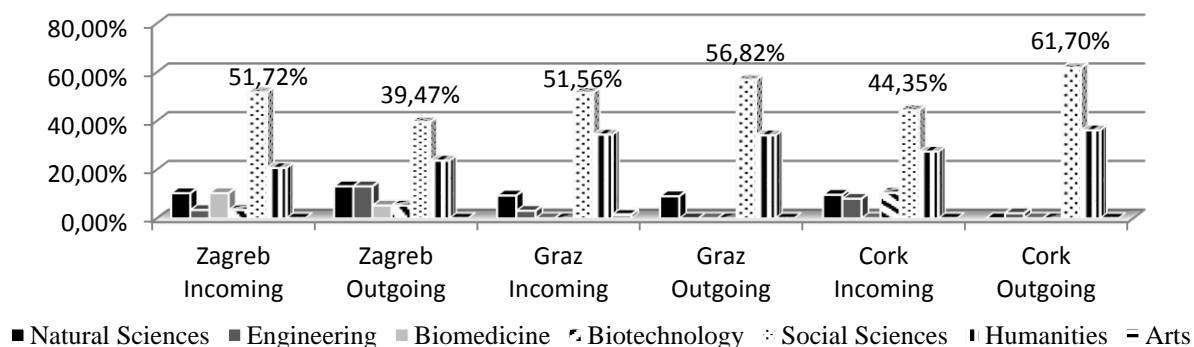
	<b>University of Zagreb, Croatia</b>	<b>Karl-Franzens University of Graz, Austria</b>	<b>University College Cork, Ireland</b>
<b>Experience with incoming students</b>	Students are in general satisfied with lectures; they like activities that the ESN (Erasmus Student Network) in Zagreb organizes for them.	We have had a lot of positive experiences! It is great to see how incoming students enjoy their time in our city and how much they develop in a positive way while they are here.	We always welcome incoming students. They are willing to participate in events we organize. They are always very friendly and positive.
<b>Experience with outgoing students</b>	In general they are coming back thrilled and they are willing to share their positive experience. Some of them started working with ESN and are helping incoming students or participating in promotion of Erasmus among Croatian students.	They are coming back with much more confidence. They are more open to new things.	It is great to see the change in the students when they return from the exchange. They gain a lot of self-confidence and independence.

**3.2. Students**

When it came to the student survey, it was already mentioned that students were divided into six groups.

In all six groups, most of the students were studying social sciences as shown in Figure 1 (in total, almost half of all students (49,71%)).

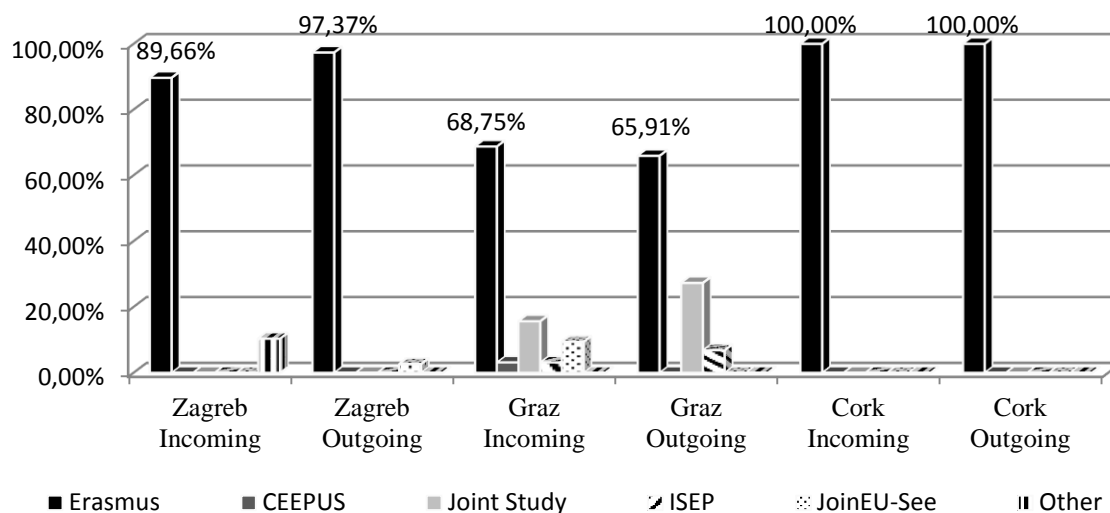
**Figure 1 Students by Field of Study**



In addition to this, of all the six groups shown in Figure 2, the majority of students participated in mobility through Erasmus programme which

was mentioned earlier as one of the best known mobility programmes in education. (All together, 88.73% of all students were Erasmus students.)

Figure 2 Students by Mobility Programme



Most of the students participating in this survey have done their mobility in 2011/2012 (69.96% of all students) and for most of them (55.30%) duration of mobility was between 4 and 6 months. The only group which differs is Cork-outgoing group where the duration of mobility was 2 semesters.

When it comes to questions about problems, the Likert-type scale was used. Students were asked to answer the questions about problems they encountered during their mobility with marks 1 to 5 (1='I had a lot of problems'; 5='I did not have any problem'). Table 2 is showing average marks for every group of students.

Table 2 Average Marks of Students' Problems (with Standard Deviation)

	Zagreb Incoming	$\sigma$	Zagreb Outgoing	$\sigma$	Graz Incoming	$\sigma$	Graz Outgoing	$\sigma$	Cork Incoming	$\sigma$	Cork Outgoing	$\sigma$	All students	$\sigma$
Average mark of problems with paperwork at home university	3.41	1.43	3.13	1.42	3.47	1.48	3.80	1.04	3.77	1.27	4.15	1.20	3.67	1.34
Average mark of problems with paperwork at host university	3.83	1.29	3.92	1.26	3.86	1.21	3.66	1.26	4.55	0.77	2.81	1.36	3.94	1.25
Average mark of problems with course schedule at host university	3.97	1.22	3.92	1.24	3.64	1.23	3.30	1.36	3.96	1.23	2.74	1.42	3.65	1.34
Average mark of problems with ECTS credits (found it difficult to take as many as needed)	4.00	1.23	4.11	1.29	3.78	1.40	3.93	1.32	4.10	1.22	2.87	1.44	3.84	1.37
Average mark of language problems at host university	4.21	1.24	4.08	1.29	3.67	1.38	4.11	1.07	4.47	0.79	2.70	1.01	3.97	1.23

Average mark of language problems in host country	4.03	1.27	4.03	1.16	3.52	1.29	4.18	0.94	4.27	0.85	2.62	1.08	3.85	1.20
Average mark of problems with health insurance in host country	4.62	0.89	4.18	1.37	4.23	1.32	4.80	0.46	4.76	0.69	4.40	1.12	4.54	1.01
Average mark of problems with room/apartment in host country	3.93	1.44	3.74	1.45	3.89	1.40	3.80	1.46	3.98	1.16	3.47	1.60	3.84	1.38
Average mark of money problems in host country	4.24	1.19	3.92	1.31	3.92	1.24	4.23	1.02	3.94	1.16	3.51	1.25	3.94	1.21

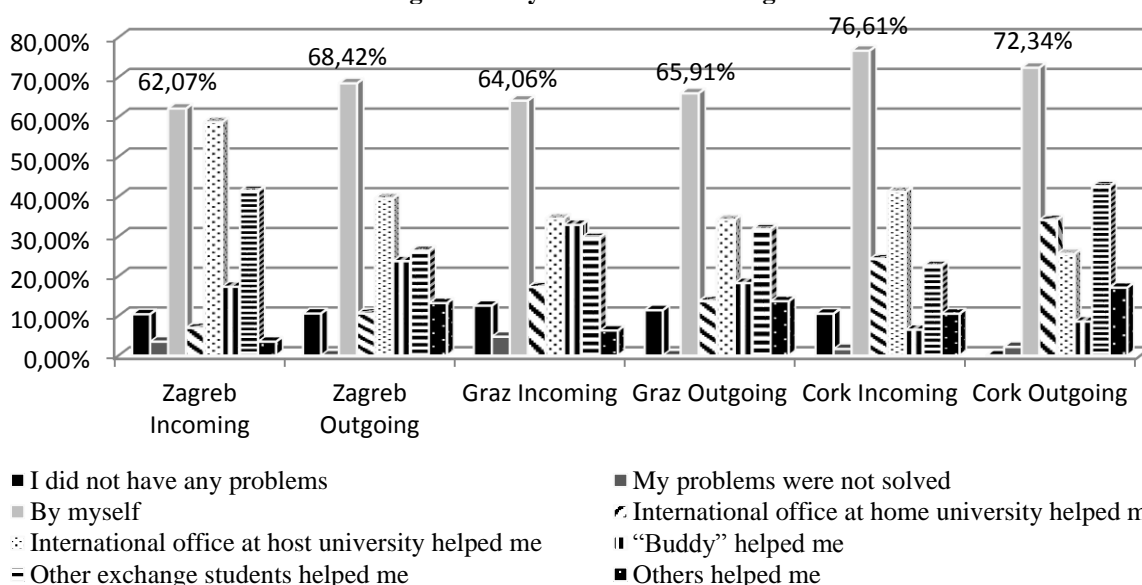
As we can see in Table 2, from the listed problems, in average students had the most problems with the paperwork and course schedule. It is interesting to see that the least problems with the paperwork at home university had Cork outgoing students and the least problems with paperwork at the host university had Cork incoming students. All that work was done in the same office – International Education Office at UCC and the students which had to do paperwork in that office had the least complains.

When it comes to groups in general, it is also interesting to notice that the biggest problems had Cork outgoing students in every group of

problems except the mentioned problems at home university (and health insurance). From all this, one could conclude that the office in Cork is very well organized and manages to give maximum support to its both incoming and outgoing students.

Students were also asked about solving problems and in every group, majority answered that all or at least most of their problems was solved eventually. In Figure 3 we can see that, when it comes to ways of solving problems, most of the students manage to solve their problems by themselves.

Figure 3 Ways of Problem Solving



After questions about problems their encountered, students were also asked about positive sides of mobility. Likert-type scale was

used again. Students were giving their opinion about mobility benefits by using marks 1 to 5 (1="Totally agree"; 5="Totally disagree"). Table

3 is showing average marks for every group of students.

**Table 3 Student Opinion on Mobility Benefits (Average Marks with Standard Deviation)**

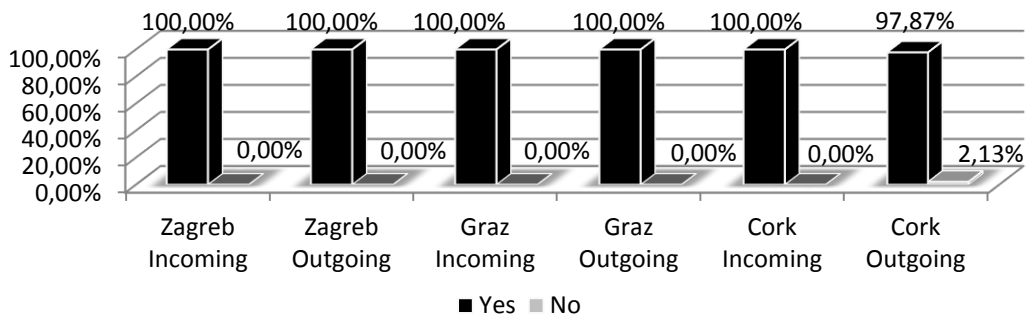
	Zagreb Incoming	$\sigma$	Zagreb Outgoing	$\sigma$	Graz Incoming	$\sigma$	Graz Outgoing	$\sigma$	Cork Incoming	$\sigma$	Cork Outgoing	$\sigma$	All students	$\sigma$
'I think that mobility experience helped me/will help me improve my foreign languages.'	1.31	0.46	1.32	0.52	1.56	0.83	1.23	0.42	1.32	0.62	1.53	0.79	1.38	0.66
'I think that mobility experience helped me/will help me to better understand different cultures.'	1.41	0.56	1.39	0.63	1.30	0.49	1.36	0.57	1.40	0.63	1.30	0.58	1.36	0.59
'I think that mobility experience helped me/will help me to gain some valuable contact for the future.'	1.83	0.83	1.58	0.75	1.98	0.94	2.07	1.25	2.17	1.07	1.96	0.97	2.00	1.03
'I think that mobility experience improved/will improve my chances of getting a job.'	1.97	1.00	1.89	0.88	2.00	1.02	2.05	0.95	2.10	0.91	1.68	0.85	1.99	0.94

From the Table 3 we can see that majority of students agree that mobility experience will help to improve language competences, enable better understand intercultural differences, gain valuable future networking and improve their competitiveness at future labour market. Students also agree that mobility enhance their independence, self-confidence, openness,

tolerance, social life, social skills, personal and professional development. All estimates are between 1 and 2, standard deviations are not bigger than 1.

Students were also asked if they would recommend to other students to go to mobility. Figure 4 shows their answers.

**Figure 4 Answer to the Question if Students Would Recommend to Other Students to Go on Student Mobility**



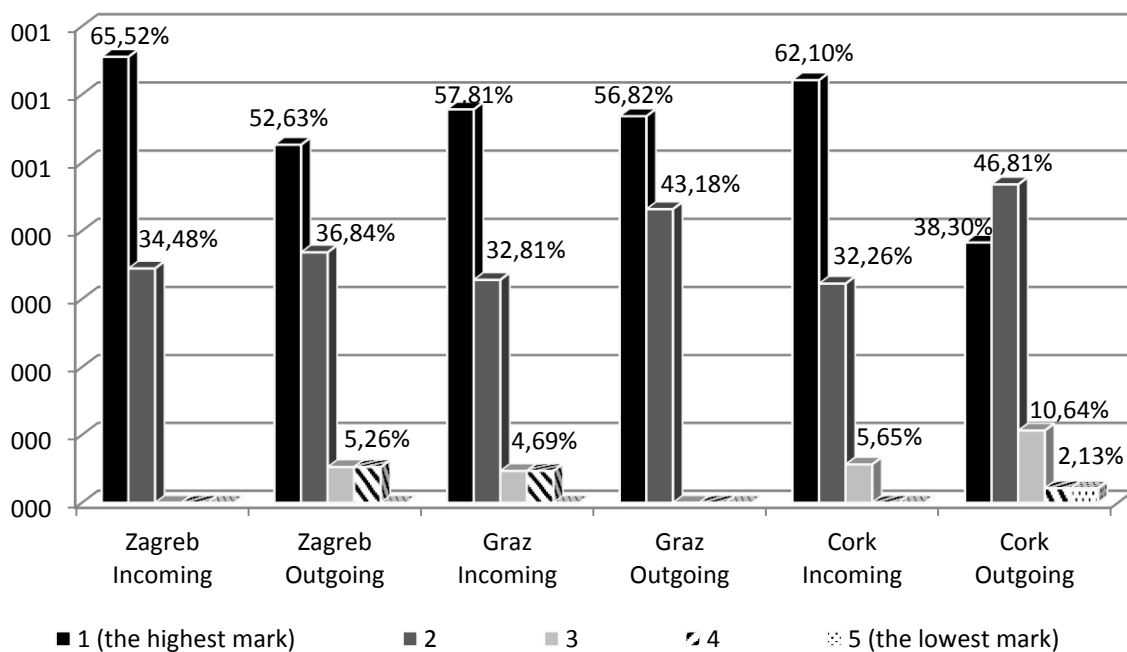
Despite the potential problems encountered during the exchange, it is obviously that students consider the experience as very useful and they would recommend it to other students. The exception was one student who said that the exchange is costly, very stressful and irrelevant for getting a degree and actually means losing a year. Other students would recommend it because they think it was the best experience they had, valuable life changing experience, an experience that will help them in social and academic life and future job, because it was the best part of the study, a unique opportunity that comes once in a lifetime and nobody should miss it.

review. For example, Rodrigues [10] reports the following conclusions regarding student mobility: Students reported that the main result of their mobility is an improvement of their language skills. It is of interest that students whose parents have a higher level of education and students with previous international exposure have more international mobility experiences. There are no significant correlations between the study period abroad and future salary gains or higher level jobs.

Some of those findings are comparable with the results of other research and the literature

At the end, students were asked to give an average mark to mobility experience they had (from 1 to 5, 1 being the highest, 5 being the lowest mark) which is shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5 Marks Students Gave to Their Mobility Experience**



In Figure 5 we can see that most of the students gave the highest mark to their experience (56.65% of all students). An average mark of the Zagreb incoming group is 1.34 ( $\sigma=0.48$ ), the Zagreb outgoing group is 1.63 ( $\sigma=0.81$ ), the Graz incoming group is 1.56 ( $\sigma=0.79$ ), the Graz outgoing group is 1.43 ( $\sigma=0.50$ ), the Cork incoming group is 1.44 ( $\sigma=0.60$ ) and the Cork outgoing group is 1.83 ( $\sigma=0.86$ ). An average mark of all students is 1.53 ( $\sigma=0.70$ ).

At the very end, students were asked for comments additional comments. Here are a few them:

*'Do it!!! You will not regret it!!'*

*'My message to all the people that are considering whether to apply or not - do it! This will be the best experience that you will have in your lifetime!'*

*'Just do it and you'll change in positive way!'*

*'I am not sure which direction my life took after the student exchange time, but I am sure my life and I have changed.'*

*'In September 2010 I cried 'cause I didn't really want to leave home... In January 2011 I didn't want to go back!'*

## 4 Conclusions

The majority of students agree that mobility enables positive experiences. Although students have had some problems such as complicated paperwork, a lack of financial support, a lack of information, problems with credit transfers..., most of these problems are solved with the help of the international offices. This finding confirms the importance of those offices: not only because they organize the mobility and develop international relations, but also because they solve problems of students. It is important to know that International relations offices are the first place for contact for international students.

Improvements are needed in terms of paperwork, financial aid, greater flexibility, better assistance with accommodation and better integration of exchange students with local students.

Despite the problems, the majority of students think that their fellow students should experience mobility. Students think that mobility is a unique opportunity that comes once in a lifetime.

*Research was conducted for a master thesis during Erasmus mobility.*

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