

# BULLETIN

## The Intra-European mobility of graduates educated in UK Higher Education Institutions

This bulletin discusses the findings from a recent study on the transferability of skills and knowledge of UK educated graduates within the European Higher Education Area. The aim of the study was to identify differences between European-mobile graduates (EMG) and those who remained in the UK after graduation; to analyse EMGs' pathways into employment or further study; and to learn about their experiences using their skills gained in the UK in a different European country. The research showed that EMGs differ from graduates who remained in the UK, especially in terms of their previous mobility experiences, their socioeconomic background, nationality, type of higher education institution attended and subject of studies. EMGs were more likely to enter further study in their new destination, and most of them valued both the traditional academic skills and the employability skills they gained during their education in the UK. The study was sponsored by the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE). The research was undertaken by Dr Heike Behle and Dr Charikleia Tzanakou.

### Intra-European Mobility of the highly skilled

Political developments such as the creation of the European Higher Education Area, the Bologna reforms and the Lisbon Convention (which regulates the recognition of Higher Education Qualifications) have facilitated not only the mobility of students, but also of graduates. Mobility of graduates (and students) is politically encouraged both by European institutions and by the UK Government (UK HE International Unit, 2013), as it is expected to enhance individual skills (Behle and Atfield, 2013) and to result in an Intra-European knowledge transfer (Teichler, 2004) creating a joined European identity.

However, increased mobility could also indicate the lack of graduate positions in the UK in which highly skilled graduates react with migration to a different country. This brain drain, as a result, would point towards a mismatch between the skills developed by the educational system and those sought after by employers (Independent, 2013).

Previous research has shown that the average level of EU movers' education is generally higher compared to non-movers (Recchi and Favell, 2009) and that mobility within European countries is no longer a one-way occurrence rather than a continuous and multiple process (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, Ackers and Gill, 2008).

### The study

In contrast to previous studies in which the transferability of skills acquired in a different country were analysed for the

home labour market (see Wiers-Jenssen and Try, 2005; Liagouras et al., 2003; Cai, 2012), the project analysed the situation of highly skilled Intra-European mobile graduates (EMG). The overall aim of the project was to find out the circumstances under which the production of knowledge in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) was transferable within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in terms of integration into the labour market or further training.

The study used existing Futuretrack<sup>1</sup> data and enhanced this with qualitative follow-up interviews. Futuretrack was a study undertaken by the IER, in which all UCAS applicants to higher education were followed through their time at university and beyond. Seven per cent of the respondents had moved to a different European country after graduating from a UK higher education institution (HEI).

EMGs were separated into three substantially different types: UK mobile graduates (37 per cent); Returning graduates (46 per cent); other mobile graduates (non UK citizens now living in a different country) (18 per cent). The situation of EMG was

<sup>1</sup> Futuretrack was a longitudinal study exploring the relationship between higher education, career decision-making and labour market opportunities funded by HECSU. It tracked the 2005/2006 cohort of UCAS applicants for five years collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. For more information see: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/ier/futuretrack>

specifically captured by twelve follow-up qualitative interviews: five UK mobile graduates; five returners; and two other mobile graduates. Interviewees were selected so that they included all three different groups of EMGs, and also included approximately the same proportion of employed graduates and those involved in further study. During the field phase, it became apparent that some of these EMGs had, at the time of their interview, already experienced multiple forms of mobility to different countries.

### 'Leavers' vs. 'Stayers' current labour market activities

A logistic regression model (Behle, 2014) was estimated to identify the factors that influence Intra-European mobility. The model showed that aspects such as age, gender, socioeconomic background, nationality, type of higher education institution attended and subject of studies influence the likelihood of being mobile. For example, graduates from the youngest and the oldest age group and female graduates were less likely to be mobile. There was a clear connection between the socio-economic background (based on parental occupations) and mobility, as those from a higher socio-economic background were more likely to be mobile compared to those from intermediate occupations. This was reflected in the qualitative data, since it seemed that most of the interviewees were exposed to different cultures (through their family and social environment) or have been mobile during their childhood (holidays with family, family's foreign friends) and their adulthood (travelling before/after/during their degree) reflecting to some extent their class. This continuous experience of mobility seems to have been incorporated in their mindset and embedded in their 'life plan' (see Brooks and Everett, 2008).

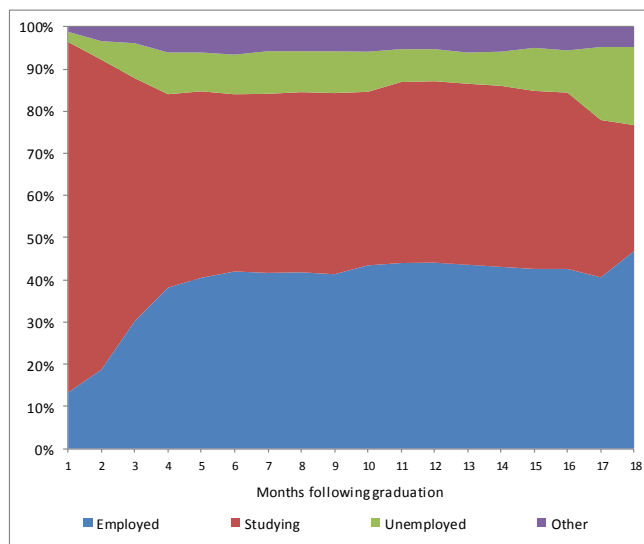
### The early pathways of EMG

Using the Activity History captured in the Futuretrack data, we were able to compare the early pathways into further study and/or employment of mobile UK graduates (figure 1) and contrast them with returning other European graduates (figure 2).

Four months after graduation, approximately 55 per cent of UK mobile graduates had entered employment whilst 29 per cent enrolled themselves in further study. In contrast, less than a third of all returners entered employment and more than half of all returners (58 per cent) had started further study. After 18 months, the proportion of UK mobile graduates in employment had increased to 60 per cent (with approximately a quarter still in further study). The corresponding figures for returning graduates 18 months after their graduation in the UK were 47 per cent in employment and 30 per cent in further study.

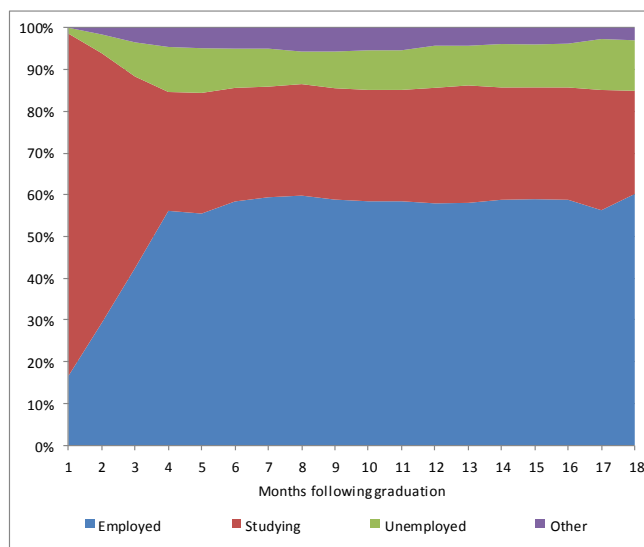
The distribution of UK mobile graduates follows the pathways of those who remained in the UK after graduation: here, 57 per cent of all those who graduated from a three-year undergraduate degree, were employed and 27 per cent were enrolled in further study four months after graduation, rising to 72 per cent in employment and 16 per cent in further study after eighteen months (Purcell et al., 201, p. 23).

Figure 1: Activity History of Returners



Source: Futuretrack 2006 combined dataset: European Mobile Graduates on three and four year courses only (weighted)

Figure 2: Activity History of UK mobile graduates



Source: Futuretrack 2006 combined dataset: European Mobile Graduates on three and four year courses only (weighted)

Despite the similarities between graduates remaining in the UK and mobile graduates, it shows that many mobile graduates enter further study in a different country from their undergraduate degree. Many graduates combine further study with mobility and aim to improve their career prospects by enhancing movers' skills (Behle and Atfield, 2013) and "by adding to an individual's social and cultural capital" (Findlay et al. 2006, p. 294). Our results confirm previous research in which existing 'mobility capital' identifies the holder as a mobile elite thus ready and willing to move, open to changes in their environment, language, personal entourage, lifestyle, working style (see Murphy-Lejeune, 2002).

## Skills gained at UK HEIs

Most interviewees valued both the traditional academic skills and the employability skills they gained during their education in the UK, which they could apply in their current employment or further study, as the following quote from a UK mobile graduate shows “a lot of my courses were critical perspective, which was very, very helpful as it allows you to kind of question things a lot more and each of them I developed a lot of ideas”. Apart from the curriculum and the highly international composition of the student body in UK higher education institutions, interviewees had access to a range of extra-curricular activities (such as volunteering, university societies), which have fostered and enhanced this skillset. More specifically, apart from subject specific skills, interviewees referred to multilingualism, critical thinking, research skills, communication/ presentation skills, teamwork/ collaboration skills developed during their higher education experience in the UK.

In addition, all respondents reported that their mobility experience (and not skills developed through higher education) had benefit them as they had acquired cultural agility/dexterity, openness, awareness of own culture and other perspectives, adaptability, flexibility, self-awareness and ability to relate to others. According to a recent report on global graduates, the aforementioned subject-related skills and the skills gained as a result of their mobility have been identified – especially when put in a global context – as global skills desired by UK recruiters (Diamond et al., 2012). In terms of skills gaps, some graduates would have welcomed more opportunities for work experience to develop and gain valuable skills. Returners and other mobile students criticised existing careers services, as being too focussed on the UK and omitting other options, especially in other European countries.

## Barriers

Interviewees were asked whether they had experienced any barriers in relation to their mobility (once the decision had been made). Barriers were defined as: general barriers; barriers to further study; and barriers to work. General barriers were related to bureaucracy and requirements to provide a number of documents – that sometimes needed to be translated – in order to register for different services, such as the local council, health insurance.

It was criticised by interviewees that there was not a comprehensive system within the European Higher Education Area where students could search and retrieve information on courses, or compare courses and programmes in European higher education institutions. This was found to confuse the decision-making process with regard to destination of mobility. As one of the interviewees put it: “I knew what I wanted to be studying [...] this kind of narrowed it down already in terms of the universities I could actually look at. It was really frustrating as the graduate recruitment fairs here in the UK had about four or five European universities”.

More importantly, interviewees reported difficulties in terms of enrolment and admission to further study in different countries, such as: taking entry exams in their specific subjects (which were not required for home students); and having to repeat part of the undergraduate degree before enrolling in the Masters in the new country due to lower level of subject knowledge.

Three respondents reported that their Master’s applications had been rejected due to ‘insufficiency’ of the degree for a Master’s programme in the new country.

Barriers to work were also documented especially from returnees. Despite the reputation of UK higher education (which was confirmed by many interviewees), three interviewees mentioned that employers in their home country did not regard overseas qualifications and education highly. The main reason was the perception that interviewees pursued a UK degree out of necessity because they were not successful in enrolling in their home country national system. Moreover, comparisons in terms of duration of degrees were ‘penalising’ UK degrees, as they are often shorter in duration and consequently considered substandard in terms of knowledge. One of the interviewees from Greece reported that during her time in the UK the rules to get overseas degrees recognised were changed. “You now need four years of degree in the UK to be recognised, which does not make sense because in Greece the fourth year in [...] is internships” whilst during her studies in the UK internships were undertaken during the summer time. In this case, the interviewee decided to get her Masters’ degree accepted as the last year of a BA degree.

Last, but not least, EMG reflected that they had a lack of, or poor, networks due to their mobility experience, which it was felt adversely affected their transition to the labour market. This was especially pertinent in sectors where networks are of paramount importance (such as the academic sector). One of the interviewees compared the situation to a ‘feudal system’ “there are chairs in the department that they keep [...] until they die. And new posts are taken by those who study under these profs, it is all very patriarchal. They [the colleges] want you to have studied there.”

## Conclusion

According to the logistic regression model based on Futuretrack data, factors influence the likelihood of an individual being mobile, such as: age; gender; socioeconomic background; nationality; type of higher education institution attended; and subject of study. Many graduates combine mobility and further study regarding their mobility as an ‘employability advantage’ (Crossman and Clarke, 2010) or as ‘mobility capital’ (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) in the competition for jobs, especially international jobs (Wiers-Jenssen, 2008). Many mobile graduates enhance their skills and competencies acquired in the UK both by their mobility and by further study in a different European country.

Graduates reported developing subject specific skills and transferrable skills during their higher education and mobility experience. These could be successfully transferred and used in their further studies and other employment contexts. Among others, interviewees reported skills, such as: critical thinking; research skills; communication; collaboration skills; cultural dexterity; flexibility; and adaptability. These are identified as increasingly important skills for graduates who want to work in global workplaces and become global leaders (Diamond et al., 2012).

It is difficult to distinguish how and to what extent these skills were developed, especially whether these competencies were acquired during their higher education and/or mobility experiences since, in some cases, these are interlinked.

However, it may be argued that international education experiences along with experiences of mobility are two important conditions for mobile graduates to develop competencies that will be valued in a global workplace.

In terms of barriers to mobility, the extent to which graduates experienced significant barriers to the recognition of their degrees was surprising, five years after the Lisbon Recognition Convention and more than ten years after the Bologna declaration. Although the sample of qualitative interviewees was small, it is still indicative of the challenges that mobile graduates confront in their pursuits of further study and careers. Despite the enormous and long-term efforts through the Bologna Process to develop a set of tools that would facilitate mobility in European countries for studies and/or employment, there are still significant barriers such as the limited recognition of degrees both by employers and HEIs, which, in the long-term, could discourage mobility.

## References

- Ackers, L. and Gill, B. (2008). Moving People and Knowledge. Scientific Mobility in an Enlarging European Union. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Behle, H. (forthcoming, 2014). European Mobility of UK educated graduates. Who stays, who goes? *Higher Education Quarterly*.
- Behle, H. and Atfield, G. (2013). Employability, key skills and graduate attributes. In: Kandiko, C.B. and Weyers, M., eds., *The Global Student Experience: An International and Comparative Analysis*. New York: Routledge, pp. 78-97.
- Brooks, R. and Everett, G. (2008). The prevalence of 'life planning': evidence from UK graduates. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(3), pp. 325-337.
- Cai, Y. (2012). International graduates from Finland: Do they satisfy the needs of Finnish employers abroad? *Journal of Research in International Education*, 11(1), pp. 19-31.
- Crossman, J. and Clarke, M. (2010). International experience and graduate employability: stakeholder perceptions on the connection. *Higher Education*, 59(5), pp. 599-613.
- Diamond, A., Walkley, L., Forbes, P., Hughes, T., and Sheen, J. (2012). *Global Graduates into Global Leaders*. London: Association of Graduate Recruiters, Council for Industry and Higher Education and CFE Research and Consulting
- Findlay, A., King, R., Stam, A. and Ruiz-Gelices, E. (2006). Ever Reluctant Europeans: The Changing Geographies of UK Students Studying and Working Abroad European. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 13, pp. 291-318.
- Independent (2013). 'The economy suffers when 'human capital' goes to waste. British employers are using a smaller proportion of the nation's human talent than they should', <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/the-economy-suffers-when-human-capital-goes-to-waste-8989365.html>
- Liagouras, G., Protogerou, I., and Caloghirou, Y. (2003). Exploring Mismatches Between Higher Education and the Labour Market in Greece. *European Journal of Education*, 38(4), pp. 413-426.
- Murphy-Lejeune, E. (2002). Student Mobility and Narrative in Europe. *The New Strangers*. London: Routledge.
- Purcell, K., Elias, P., Atfield, G., Behle, H., Ellison, R. and Luchinskaya, D. (2013). *Futuretrack Stage 4: Transitions into employment, further study and other outcomes*. Sheffield: HECSU/IER.
- Recchi, E. and Favell, A., eds. (2009). *Pioneers of European Integration. Citizenship and Mobility in the EU*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Teichler, U. (2004). The changing debate on internationalism of higher education. *Higher Education*, 48(1), pp. 5-26.
- UK HE International Unit (2013). UK Strategy for Outward Mobility, <http://www.international.ac.uk/media/2468186/uk-he-international-unit-uk-strategy-for-outward-mobility.pdf>
- Wiers-Jenssen, J. (2008). Does Higher Education Attained Abroad Lead to International Jobs? *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12, pp. 101-130.
- Wiers-Jenssen, J. and S. Try (2005). Labour market outcomes of higher education undertaken abroad. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(6), pp. 681-705.

## Further information

For further information on the project go to <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/ier/research/transferability>. The report will be published on the SRHE website.

### IER e-newsletter

Have you signed up to receive the IER monthly newsletter by email? Find out about our latest news, research and publications.

To subscribe go to <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/ier>

 **Follow us @ warwickier**

 **LinkedIn**

WARWICK INSTITUTE for  
EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH

University of Warwick  
Coventry CV4 7AL  
ier@warwick.ac.uk