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International Mobility of Romanian Students in Europe: From Statistical Evidence to Policy Measures

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International Mobility of Romanian Students in Europe: From Statistical Evidence to Policy Measures

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Abstract: International mobility of any kind is quite young in Romania, and it was possible only after falling of the communist regime in 1989. Consequently, the paper reflects firstly some conceptual issues on international student mobility; than, in the second part, a statistical portrait of student mobility in Romania is presented, in connection with the European context. We notices that the Romanian student mobility is lower that European one, so in the third part we focus on barriers to international student mobility, and also on policy measures that should be taken in Romania.

Key words: higher education, international student mobility, Romania, policy measures

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1. Introduction

After the fall of the totalitarian regime, Romania entered a complex transition to market economy and democracy, a process which affected every domain from society to economy, culture and politics.

Reform in the field of higher education began right after 1989 and aimed initially at eliminating courses that had become obsolete in view of the new option and, during a second more extensive phase, building a coherent legal frame that could ensure a more effective higher education. The reform of Romanian higher education, awaited by Romanian young people, represents at this moment the construction of a higher education system as compatible as possible with the European educational

space. In addition, Romanian higher education institutions need to respond to the demands of the knowledge-based society and European Higher Education Area.

In addition, one of the main progresses registered towards the Bologna Process in Romania, focusing mostly on the last development from Bergen to London is *Cooperation and partnerships among higher education institutions across the European Higher Education Area* [8].

Today mobility involves in Romania larger numbers of people and is supported by education programmes at national and international levels and in particular within the framework of EU funded programmes. Hundreds of students and teaching staff participate in exchange programmes each year, and political, social and technological changes have made (academic) mobility in general a lot easier. Despite its growing trend and its increasing importance, the phenomenon is not well represented in the literature. One possible explanation is that international mobility of any kind is quite young in Romania, and it was possible only after falling of the communist regime in 1989. Beside this, Romania, as other European countries, is confronted from various reasons, with a lack of statistical data on migration, mobility and student mobility. Consequently, the paper reflects firstly some conceptual issues on international student mobility; than, in the second part, a statistical portrait of student mobility in Romania is presented, in connection with the European context. We notice that the Romanian student mobility is lower than European one, so in the third part we focus on barriers to international student mobility, and also on policy measures that should be taken in Romania.

2. Conceptual issues on international student mobility

Mobility goes in many cases together with migration and for each of them there is not a widely spread and accepted definition.

Mobility is the child of academic freedom and of the irreplaceable exchange of ideas in research, as well as in teaching and study. The literature on mobility classifies the phenomenon into different types, some of which are opposition pairs [5]. First of all, there is the differentiation into “forced” and “voluntary mobility”. *Voluntary mobility* is referred to young students, mainly in their first career to degree, who seek diversity in their study curriculum and eventually return to their home country, either with a degree earned abroad, or ready to take one at home. *Forced mobility* is motivated by poor study condition, political repression, by bleak labour market. The forced or involuntary mobility is also associated with refugee status, gender related, ethnic, religious, language base rain-drain. From this list, it is clear that the interface between mobility and migration is blurred. What is certain is the fact that in the higher education, they are both part of a large system of brain circulation.

International student mobility involves students leaving their country of residence for a period of higher education abroad, or to pursue a related activity such as a foreign work placement or study tour.

International student mobility is defined¹ as *any form of international mobility that takes place within a student’s programme of study in higher education*. The length of absence ranges from a short trip to a full-duration programme of study such as a degree. In addition to study at a foreign higher education institution, mobility can also involve a period in a workplace or other non-higher education environments. Ideally the period of mobility should be long enough to have an impact on the student’s appreciation of a foreign culture, and it should have some defined role within a student’s learning experience. For many students, this includes the opportunity to apply skills in a foreign work context. However, definitional boundaries are not easy to draw, particularly with regard to short trips

¹ International student mobility, Report by the Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex, and the Centre for Applied Population Research, University of Dundee, Commissioned by HEFCE, SHEFC, HEFCW, DEL, DfES, UK Socrates Erasmus Council, HEURO, BUTEX and the British Council

abroad, and especially when these do not have an explicitly educational purpose. In Erasmus programme the period of mobility is between 3 month and 12 month.

In many countries definition of mobility is associated with *foreign nationality* of the students. By applying the nationality criterion, it is as if permanent residents of foreign nationality are regarded as mobile students and thus included in the data concerned, although their presence is not directly related to their student status. Romania, as a few other European countries report foreign/mobile students according to country of residence or country of domicile and not according to country of citizenship. Such approaches lead to a limitation in degree of comparison of international data on mobility. This was one of the most important findings of the study realized by ACA². Available “mobility statistics” do not, in most cases, report on mobility at all. Only 10 out of the 32 countries included in the ACA study collect data on genuine mobility i.e. on students moving across country borders for the purpose of study.

It is important to mention the recommendation to institutional, national and international organizations involved in higher education around the world that definition and data should be more compatible. Eurostat’s work on statistics should be supported by common definitions and criteria and more up-to-date input by different countries.

3. Dimension of international student mobility in Romania. A statistical portrait

The beginning of century XXI marked a spectacular ascent in the number of international students at world-wide level. In 2004, at least 2.5 million students of tertiary level studied outside their country of origin, compared with 1.75 million that did it in 1999, which represents an increase of 41%.

In 2004, 132 million students were registered anywhere in the world in superior education; value that is very over 68 million that did it in 1991. More than half of the students of tertiary education of the world one is in two regions, Eastern Asia and the Pacific and North America and Western Europe; and each one of these regions represents more of a quarter of the world-wide total of students in this level.

Between 1991 and 2004, in Central and Eastern Europe the matriculations of tertiary level increased, in average, to annual 5%. After a slow beginning, from end of the 90 years, the growth level has stayed constant. Although the number of students of superior education in the Russian Federation lowered more than annual 3% between 1991 and 1996; in Poland, Romania and Turkey the matriculations increased.

In the last 17 years, emigration has started to be a more serious problem, as people counteract the lack of opportunities in Romania by migration prospects. Moreover, it is rather the skilled and young who are the most likely to move abroad and, unfortunately, they usually choose permanent migration [9]. It is not a surprise that the number of Romanian students that migrate towards the Western educational systems, without ever coming back home, is constantly increasing. The reasons for such a brain drain can be easily noticed. On the one hand, it is the academic environment that provides the youngsters with the guarantee of a qualitative educational process and international certification. On the other hand, it is the perspective of superior material stimuli and the promotion of the best students in the educational and research institutes, or even in the most competitive multinational companies.

Romanian universities are trying to adapt and they have chosen some forms of international co-operation such as [11]:

² Maria Kelo, Ulrich Teichler, Bernd Wächter (eds.), EURODATA – Student mobility in European higher education, Bonn: Lemmens 2006 (ISBN 3-932306-72-4)

- ▶ *Trans-frontier student exchanges* between various higher education institutions, for short-term study visits or practical activities, on the basis of bilateral agreements;
- ▶ *International student mobility* based upon institutional agreements or the affiliation to various university networks, with the recognition of the study periods by use of compatible transferable credit systems;
- ▶ Involvement of Romanian university departments or teachers in the *offering of trans-national higher education* including *joint training programs, programs typical to virtual universities*, to other types of institutions involved in *e-learning* etc.
- ▶ *Teaching staff exchange* in the field of education and research, in order to cover an existing need in the field at the host university or to offer aid in the development of new syllabi, new support for learning, new technologies of teaching and learning etc;
- ▶ The creation of programs for *granting joint degrees* on the basis of an agreement between a Romanian university and a foreign university, with the observance of the rules existing in each one of the participating countries.

Student and teaching staff exchange programs were set beginning with 1991 within the TEMPUS program between Romanian universities and universities in EU countries.

Higher education institutions in Romania have been involved in SOCRATES and LEONARDO da VINCI programs starting 1997. Starting with 1998 Romanian universities have taken part in projects developed within the CEEPUS Programme (Central European Exchange for University Students Programme) that promote student mobility for full academic studies, master's and doctorate programmes, as well as exchanges between teaching staff and researchers.

The National Office for Student Grants Abroad was created in January 1998. It manages grants through which the Government of Romania supports Romanian students, in order to study abroad for relatively short periods of time.

After 1998, over 9,000 students have participated to ERASMUS mobilities. During the academic year 2002/2003 45 universities participated in ERASMUS activities, involving approximately 2,400 students.

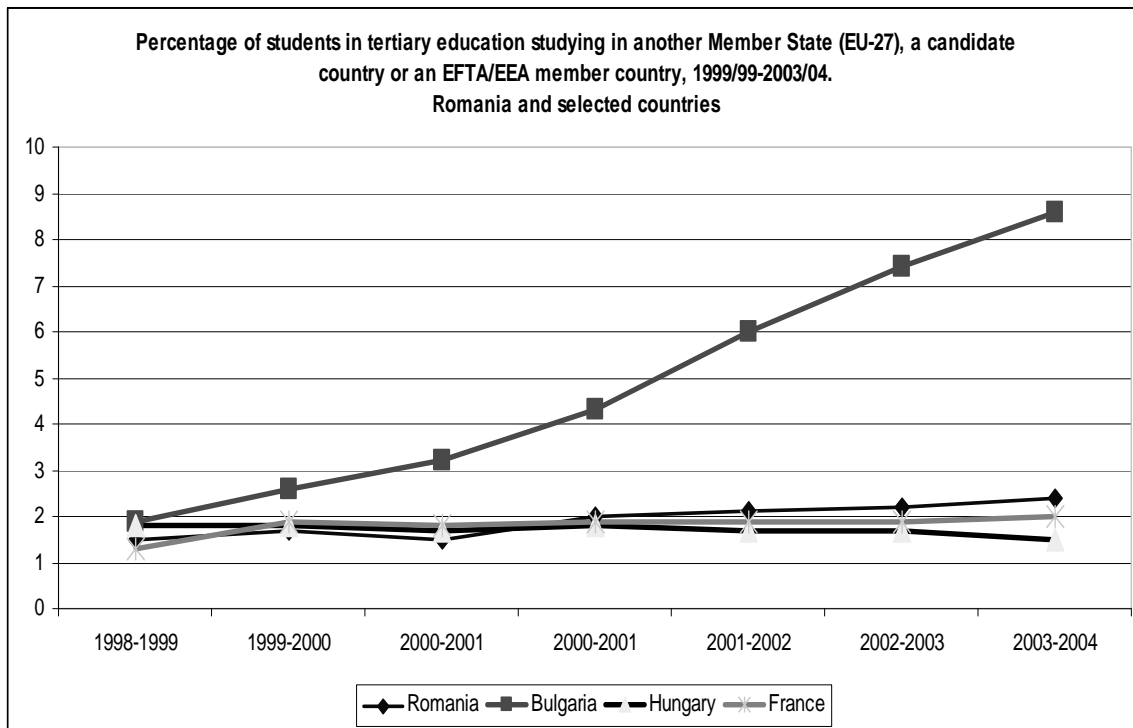
Table 1. Dynamics of participants in the Erasmus Program

Year	Number of institutions	Number of students
1998-1999	30	1250
1999-2000	32	1497
2000-2001	40	2000
2001-2002	45	2110
2002-2003	45	2400

Source: Ministry of Education and Research, 2006

Less than 3 % of students from the great majority of other European countries were studying abroad in 2004. The least mobile were Spanish, Polish and UK students, 1.2 % of whom or less went abroad. On the other hand, Bulgarian, Greek, Irish, Maltese and Slovak students were more mobile, with between 7-10 % of them studying in another European country.

**Figure 1. Percentage of students studying in Europe (1998/99-2003/04).
Romania and selected countries**



Source: adapted from EUROSTAT 2007

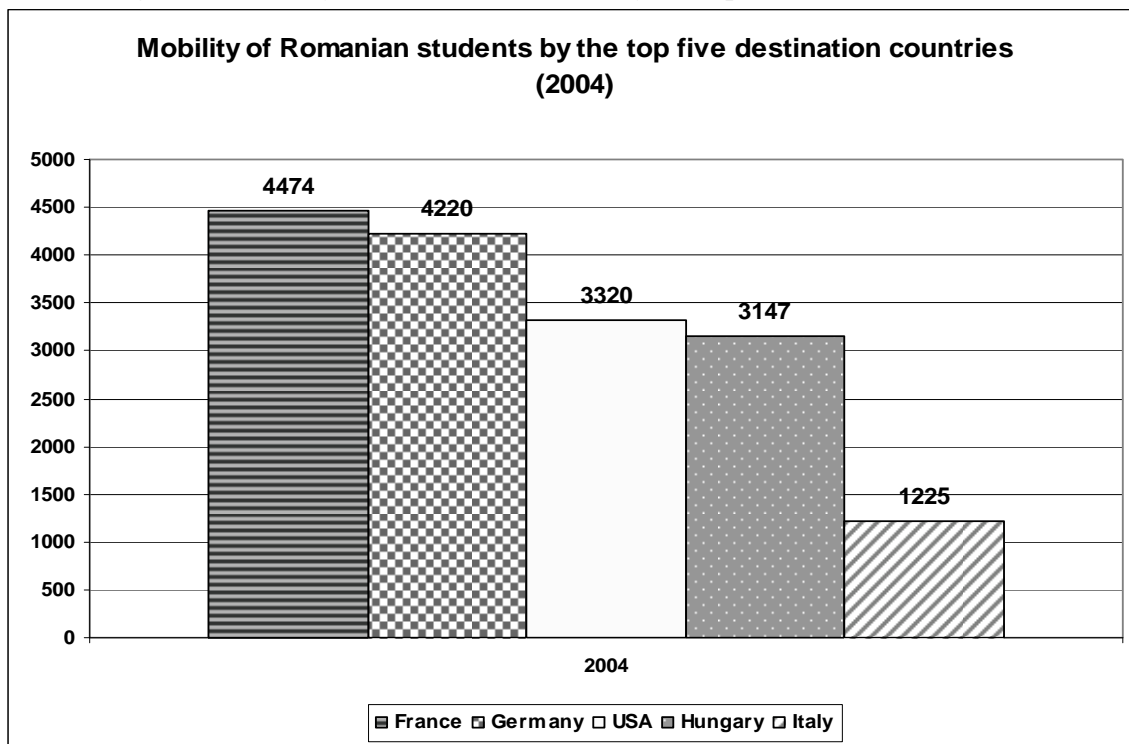
The percentage of Romanian students who are studying in Europe was 2.4% in 2004 and is has been moving upward during last years, so that it has overcome the European average, of 2.2%.

Although the mobility of students was not only in one way, many of our students leave the country for study in some other country for new experiences and probably a better access to information. The most wanted destination countries, within Europe are: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and it is also important to notice the important number of students that go overseas, in United States.

This East-West student mobility is a well known form of vertical mobility. There is made in the literature [5] the difference between the two forms of mobility: vertical and horizontal mobility. Vertical mobility is defined as a move from a country or institution of a lower academic quality to a country or institution of a higher education or superior quality, while horizontal mobility is a move between countries and institutions of similar academic quality.

Horizontal mobility is noticed in Hungary's case. In this case the important number of Romanian students is explained by Hungarian language spoken in Transylvania by Hungarian minority, as well as by increasing cooperation between higher education institutions from Transylvania and Hungary.

Figure 2. Mobility of Romanian students by the top five destination countries

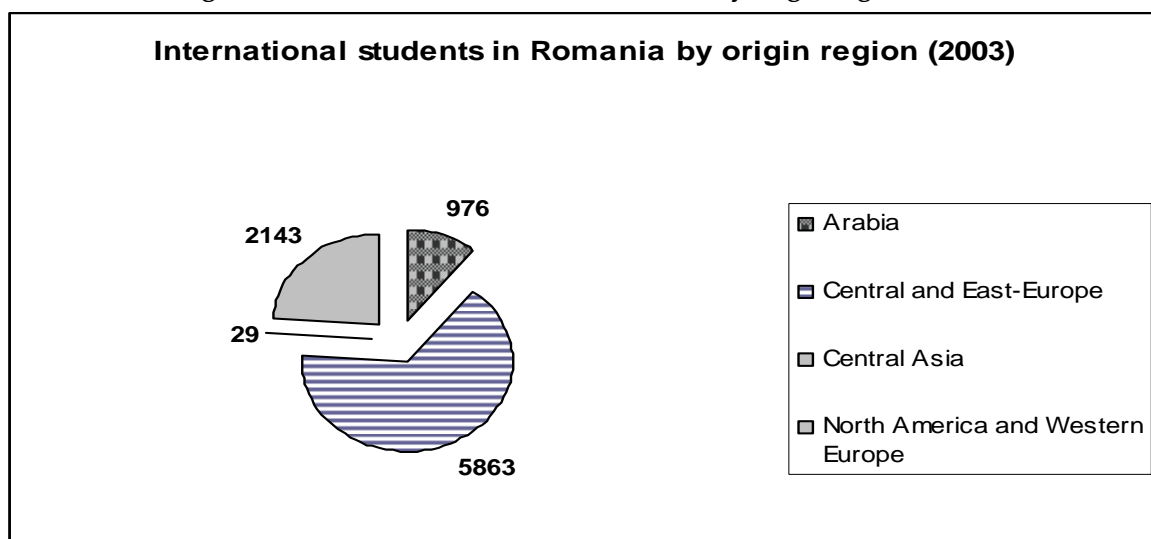


Source: adapted from OECD 2006

At the same time, a significant number of students from various EU countries have studied in Romania. Starting with the academic year 1990/1991, several Romanian universities have offered complete study programs in foreign languages like English, French and German.

The mobility of students (income and outgoing) it's one of many sources of the problem of brain drain and brain gain. According to OECD data, in 2004, 9730 foreign students were studying in Romania, and almost half of them were female (44%). It is worth to mention that most of these students were coming from Central and East European countries, and more than 4200 were coming from our closest neighbour, Republic of Moldova.

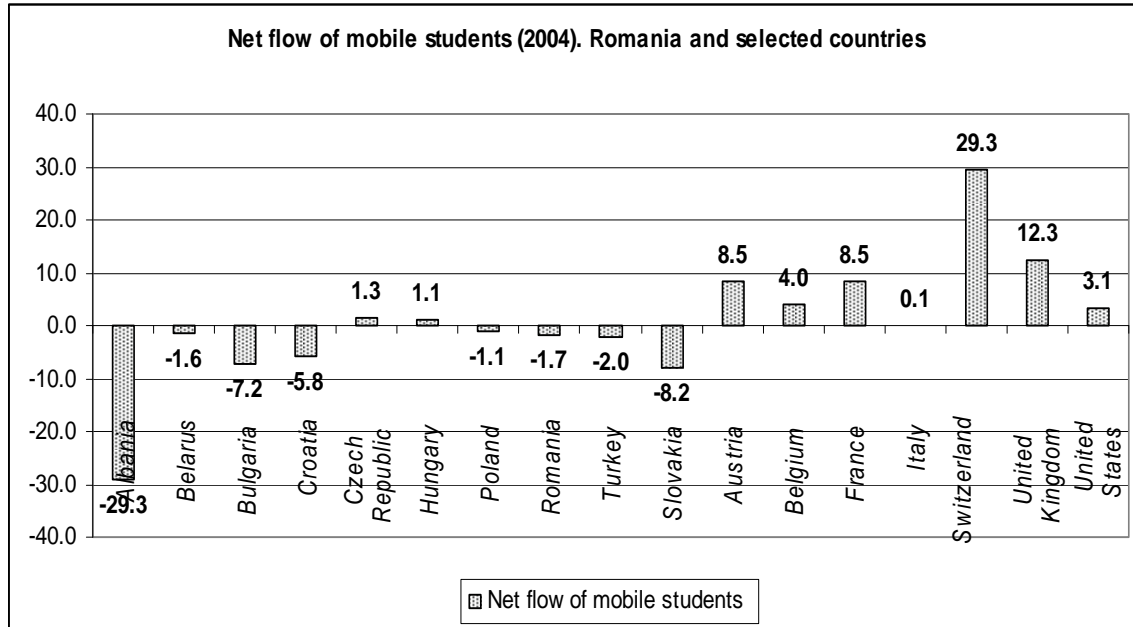
Figure 3. International students in Romania by origin region (2003)



Source: adapted from OECD 2006

The outbound mobility rate was 3.2 %, which compared to the inbound mobility rate of 1.5% leads to a negative net flow ratio of 1.7%. The situation is common for most of the countries from Central and Eastern Europe, which are student providers for Western countries, rather than student receivers. On the other hand, net flow ratio is positive in Western Europe, as well as in United States.

Figure 4. Net flow of mobile students (2004). Romania and selected countries



Source: adapted from OECD 2006

It is not a surprise that the number of Romanian students that migrate toward the Western educational systems, without ever coming back home, is constantly increasing. It seems that rather the skilled and young who are the most likely to move abroad and they usually choose permanent emigration³.

The reasons for such a brain drain⁴ can be easily noticed. On the one hand, it is the academic environment that provides the youngsters with the guarantee of a qualitative educational process and international certification. On the other hand, it is the perspective of the superior material stimuli and the promotion of the best students in the educational and research institutes, or even in the most competitive multinational companies. Of course, the receiving country benefits from the capitalization of the foreign talents, whereas, Romania (the sending country) faces the loss of the value added that could have been directed toward the society's development.

This brain drain is very much connected with opinion of highly skills persons about migration. In order to understand the attitude of Romanian students towards migration, in the first quarter of 2004, a survey entitled "*Romanian students' attitude towards migration*"⁵ was carried out in Bucharest. The objective was to observe the general opinion among students regarding the phenomenon of migration. The survey involved 92 students coming from five different universities: Academy of Economic Studies, Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Architecture and University of Polytechnics.

³ Brain Drain and the Academic and the Intellectual Labour Market in South East-Europe- International Roundtable, www.ad-astra.ro/library/papers/Aferro_Brain_Drain.pdf

⁴ Spokesmen for the Royal Society of London coined the expression "*brain drain*" to describe the outflow of scientists and technologists to [Canada](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_drain) and the [United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_drain) in the early 1950s. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_drain

⁵ Bogoi, Laura; Breabăn, Diana; Burtoiu, Cristiana; Bușe, Maria – *Calling for an answer: Is migration a solution?*, Students' Scientific Research Session, ASE, Bucharest, April 2004; Coordonating teacher: Prof.univ.dr. C. Suci. The paper has received the British Council Special Awareness Price

The sample of students was randomly chosen and the survey was performed face-to-face by means of a questionnaire.

More than half (55%) of the respondents considered that their living standard could be better. Those who were pleased with the situation represented another important percentage (38%). This could be explained by the fact that they had not been faced yet with earning their own living. Therefore, the quality of life in Romania can be a cause of migration. Only 23% of the respondents would not like to live in another country. On the contrary, the percentage of the students willing to live abroad was very high. More than half (53%) want to live in Europe, while 20% in the USA.

At this moment one could have said that the phenomenon of migration of labor force would have a great impact on our country, but, the situation is not that somber, as just a half of the students pro-abroad would leave the country for a better life. Those who considered that they would have liked to live there because there is more civilization and because there were higher social, spiritual and cultural values, were not willing to leave Romania. For them the Occident was an attraction, but not a reason to live and work there. Therefore, the Occident is, indeed, a great attraction for the youngsters, but a positive attitude regarding the country is also displayed among the students.

The survey also led to the result that the actual situation in Romania is the cause of the migration of labor force, as the image of the Occident in the opinion of youngsters is the opposite of that in our country. Still, some of the respondents were very realistic and believed that the situation is the same, as all over the world it is the same fight for surviving. But, on the overall, the young labor force was disappointed with their home country's economic situation. This is the only reason for which they would leave Romania, supposing that in the Occident the situation is better.

4. Barriers to international student mobility. Policy implications

The social dimension of the Bologna Process is a necessary condition for the attractiveness and competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area. This implies making quality higher education equally accessible to all, and stress the need for appropriate conditions for students so that they can completed heir studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. The social dimension⁶ includes measures taken by governments to help students, especially from socially disadvantaged groups, in financial and economic aspects and to provide them with guidance and counselling services with a view to widening access. At numerous meetings and seminars it has been concluded that among the obstacles to mobility, issues related to **visas and social security protection for students and staff engaged in mobility, recognition of study and work periods and lack of financial incentives** are some of the most commonly observed problem areas¹⁰. Beside this, language and cultural aspects are regarded by many specialists as a barrier in student mobility.

- *Visas*

One of the most important consequences of Romania's joining European Union at January the 1st is the liberalization of access in all EU countries, based now on identity card. This present situation is a huge progress compared to the years before, when obtaining a visa was often a big challenge for Romanian students. There are also European countries in which case a visa is needed (Russia, Ukraine), and countries from North America, which are often targets for mobility of Romanian students (US, Canada). In such cases, the application requirements for getting a visa or a residence permit can be very detailed and time consuming as well as expensive.

⁶ Key issues for the European Higher Education Area– Social Dimension and Mobility Report from the Bologna Process Working Group on Social Dimension and Data on Mobility of Staff and Students in Participating Countries, Ministry of Education and Research, Sweden, 2007

- *Finance*

Issues related to insufficient financial support are common in all countries. However, the effect of inadequate financing had a diverse effect from country to country.

Two financial support mechanisms for international mobility may be distinguished in Europe, namely financial support earmarked specifically for mobility and 'mainstream' national financial support that is portable⁷. Romania award financial support specifically for mobility but without any portability of national support.

The Romanian students' mobility⁸ was mainly financed by scholarships (e.g. Erasmus, Raiffeisen, ONBSS etc.), subventions, and, in a very small proportion, by loans. It should be noted that the average value of an Erasmus monthly grant is €140, which is only intended to cover the travelling expenses and differences between the cost of living. While the range of the monthly grant lies between €100-400, even the highest amount is scarce to cover the vast differences in the standard of living between some countries in Europe.

At present, only two banks⁹ in Romania grant loans for university or Master studies abroad: HVB Țiriac and Transilvania Bank¹⁰. The consequence is that mobility is partially financed by students families, which is a strong barrier in access to abroad education for many Romanian students.

The finance obstacle can be removed by an increasing participation in Tempus, Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus, Leonardo Programmes and bi-lateral agreements between countries and higher education institutions.

One of the most important measures that must be taken is also the *promoting of the full use of mobility programmes*. In Romania the lack of information regarding scholarships represents an alarm signal. It was surprisingly noticed in a study conducted by Open Society Foundation that reflect that a great number of students (a quarter of those who answered) don't know what an Erasmus scholarship is. Apart from them, there are also almost one third of the students who don't know what happens with the credits obtained after a study period resulted from such scholarship. Consequently, despite the stated support for student mobility, in reality, the mechanisms that should encourage it are very little developed.

- *Diploma recognition*

At this moment, through commitments assumed at the European level, focused on quality assurance, credit transfers and transparency of educational programmes description, qualifications (diplomas) obtained in the Romanian Higher Education ensure the academic and professional mobility of the graduates all over the world. Nevertheless, for a long period of time, Romanian academic degrees have faced recognition problems in Western Europe and North America. In the case of subject matters such as medicine, the problems still continue today. The topic is consequently sensitive, in terms of the need for external recognition.

This obstacle is particularly worth of attention, since it can be improved without dedication of vast financial resources. Concerning the recognition of courses attended in foreign universities the

⁷ Full portability of financial support is defined as the situation in which **all kinds of support** available for students in their home country may also be claimed, in accordance with the same conditions of award and payment, by the reference student who undertakes all or part of his or her study abroad. In other words, the home country concerned does not place any restrictions on portability. In the case of conditional portability, the additional restrictions that apply are identified. Six major categories have been selected here: restrictions tied to the period spent studying abroad, the host country, the host institution, types of course, how courses or students progress, and language requirements.

⁸ SOPEMI 2006

⁹ DOBRE, Raluca – "*Băncile au oferte sărace de credite pentru studii*" in *Compact*, 4 June 2007

¹⁰ According to the average level of the annual university fees, expressed in USD at the parity purchasing power (source: OECD), several groups of countries with the afferent fees can be identified: states without university fees: Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Slovakia, Sweden; USD 150-1,000: France, Hungary, Turkey (with less than USD 500); Belgium, Austria, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland; USD 1,000-2,000: Great Britain, Netherlands (with the mention that there are only private higher education institutions in these countries, and the students are enrolled through government programs); USD 2,000-3,000: New Zealand, Israel; USD 3,000-4,000: Canada, Chile, Australia, Japan, Korea; Over USD 4,500: USA.

European credit transfer system is considered to be a suitable instrument, but still not completely sufficient. The programme itself was launched within the framework of Erasmus, and guarantees the reciprocal recognition of qualifications awarded by the institutions, which participate in it. Promoting Diploma Supplements could also be a tool to enable Romanian student mobility, as well as increasing the number of joint degrees and increasing information about access to courses available.

An extremely important measure that should be taken is raising the attractiveness of Romanian university for foreign students. In addition, more courses and programs in Romanian Universities have to be taught in English.

- *Language*

In all countries language is a barrier to student mobility. In case of France, for instance, the language of the destination country was an important factor in deciding where to study. Romanian students, as we show previous, are studying both in Anglophone and non Anglophone countries and they not seem to have a linguistically problem. According to the study conducted by Open Society Foundation¹¹, it seems that one third of the students believe that most of their colleagues would have no problem understanding a course in another language, and another third believes that half of their colleagues would be able to deal with such a situation. The study also noticed that the courses in English (contemporary lingua franca) are absolutely rare outside the faculties with teaching in this language. So it is necessary to introduce more language courses to assist inward mobility, together with increasing provision in English and other widely used European languages.

- *Attitudinal and socio-cultural factors*

Though the above issues constitute the bulk of student mobility obstacles, we should not forget the cultural and attitudinal factors standing against mobility, as well as the lack of information and various administrative barriers, which can also hold back mobility.

5. Concluding remarks

The Romanian education system is now at a turning point. The economic and social changes the Romanian society is experiencing and the occurrence of the first effects of the change in population age structure could explain the situation. Deep changes are expected to take place, under the pressure and the challenges of modernization and the EU rules and standards.

The Bologna process had a great impact on higher education policy and on the course and program structure at many education institutions. The mobility factor will considerably affect the future of higher education and its benefits must not be neglected.

In spite of the absence of a comprehensive data collection on the social dimension of higher education, the data provided by national and international institutions can nevertheless deliver valuable information. In fact, we conclude that Romanian student mobility is facing a dimension unmet before and is increasingly during the last years. If we take into consideration the inflow and outflow of international students in Romania, there is a net negative flow. The key findings are linked to obstacles and solution in overcome this obstacles. After Romania entering the EU, the visa obstacle became much more easily to pass. The available evidence points, in our opinion, to two key constraints: finance and the lack of information. It is also stress out the necessity of Romanian higher education institutions to be more involved in attracting European students.

¹¹ Comsa, Tufis, C., Voicu, B. (2007), *Romanina Academic System, Students and teacher's opinion*, OSF, www.osf.ro

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