Opinion | Rebekka Opsal
A Tendency of Neighbourly Exchange

There is a broad consensus in Norway that internationalization in the form of student mobility in higher education is a good thing for the student, higher education institutions and society at large. Minister of Research and Higher Education, Iselin Nybø, writes in the invitation to submit input to the upcoming parliamentary report on international student mobility, that “international co-operation and cross-border dialogue is a prerequisite for dealing with the major global societal challenges facing the world,” and “[k]nowledge and intercultural understanding are fundamental and crucial to addressing the challenges facing the world today”.

I agree with the Minister, and in my opinion, international student mobility can potentially play a role in reaching the sustainable development goals (SDGs), as well as to solve humanity's challenges and together create increased community benefits beyond 2030. However, in the national debate on international student mobility, the overall focus seems to be: How to get more Norwegian students to travel? But given the ambitions of the Minister for Research and Higher Education has for what student mobility should contribute to, is it then completely arbitrary where Norwegian students choose to travel?

An imbalanced global exchange

According to Diku – Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education – 34,008 Norwegian students went on exchange in the period of 2014-2018. Of these, 55.3 percent went to only seven countries: The United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Denmark, and Spain. These countries fall under the category of countries we like to compare ourselves with, precisely because these countries are indeed similar to Norway in several important fields.

If one further includes all so-called Western countries, a total of 76.6 percent of all Norwegian students' exchange visits have gone to Western countries. There are also some interesting trends at a European level. In the period mentioned above, 13,860 students went on exchange in Europe, while only 5.7 percent of them went to Eastern European countries, which undoubtedly offer greater
differences to Norway than the rest of the Western countries. I myself am on exchange in Romania this semester, a country where only 17 Norwegian students went in the 2014-2018 period.

Only 2 621 students, 7.5 percent, went to one of the countries China, Japan, India, Brazil or South Africa. These are countries that play important political, economic, and cultural roles in their regions, and in international relations. The major global challenges cannot be solved without these countries participating. But ten times as many Norwegian exchange students travel to a western country as to one of these countries, and the knowledge of these countries is therefore correspondingly small in a student exchange perspective.

**A call for minimizing barriers**

The numbers are striking, and I believe they indicate an unfortunate pattern in which exchange agreements actually exist and are attractive. Norwegian students are primarily engaged in a neighborly exchange, in the sense that the vast majority go on exchange to countries that we largely share with and where the education system is largely similar to ours.

Furthermore, there are several good reasons for higher education institutions to have agreements primarily in countries where the education system is similar and for students to choose countries with lower language barriers. I do not mean to imply that there is some kind of conspiracy where exchange agreements in countries outside the so-called West are deliberately avoided, neither from the institutions nor from the students. There are good practical reasons why the numbers look the way they do. Nonetheless, I think it is crucial to work towards minimizing these barriers: Every exchange agreement must include language courses for students and should also include pre-approval of courses. By reducing bureaucratic processes and providing language support, students may be more inclined to choose exchange options in non-Western countries.

I would like to emphasize that I do not in any way believe that what I refer to as neighborly exchange is somehow bad or that exchange stays in Australia or Denmark are less beneficial for the student, higher education or society at large than, for example, an exchange stay in China, Brazil or Romania. On the contrary, I believe that all exchanges are good in itself, but in totality, the numbers indicate that Norwegian students' exchange stays contribute to a lesser extent to intercultural understanding and knowledge of the world beyond so-called Western countries. All of which in turn is contributing to upholding barriers for global cooperation in reaching the SDGs.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, in further improving the conditions on international student mobility, we have to take these numbers into account. Policymakers must encourage and provide higher education institutions with incentives to initiate and further develop high quality agreements with universities outside the so-called West. It cannot be arbitrary what exchange agreements actually exist and are attractive among Norwegian higher education institutions if student exchange is to be relevant for "dealing with the major global societal challenges facing the world."
Ministry of Education and Research - Invitation to submit input to the parliamentary report on international student mobility (my translations in the text): [https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/06e5c7e0dc1e47d5b6e09ac4b084285e/invitasjon-til-a-komme-med-innsipp-til-stortingsmeldingen-om-internasjonal-studentmobilitet.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/06e5c7e0dc1e47d5b6e09ac4b084285e/invitasjon-til-a-komme-med-innsipp-til-stortingsmeldingen-om-internasjonal-studentmobilitet.pdf)