



7th ASEF Rectors' Conference and Students' Forum (ARC7)

Students' Forum: 11–15 May 2019 | Rectors' Conference: 12–14 May 2019

Bucharest, Romania

Higher Education Taking Action towards the Sustainable Development Goals:
Perspectives from Asia and Europe

Opinion | Elena Štefancová

Challenges of International Mobility

We all heard about the pros of work and study mobility. Commonly mentioned are personal gains of the individuals in form of development of competences, intercultural learning, increase of employability, etc. And gains of communities such as more cohesive societies, the altruism that comes with making a community a better place, the impact of volunteering on host communities, internationalisation at home, etc. Less is spoken about their disadvantages and problems. Common problems of young people during study mobilities is failure to recognize gained ECT credits at the home institution. The challenges of the work mobilities are that often, the provided internships are unpaid.

A common problem at my university and in my country – Slovakia – as a whole is that if a student goes abroad for a few semesters and then comes back to his home university, it is unlikely for his gain ECT credits to be recognized. Often the problem is caused by too narrow and strict study programs, which have a minimum of elective courses. Another problem can be that the course at home institution is worth more credits than its equivalent abroad. Because of that, the number of students spending some time abroad is low, even though programs such as Erasmus+ mobilities have been gaining popularity during the last few years. The non-recognition of the courses most of the time leads to a prolonged time of studies of the student.

However, I see the main problem in the politic around the fees for studies. In Slovakia, higher education is free. For many years, it was free unconditionally, and later got limited for students till their 26th birthday. Then, a change came with the first attempt of the government to make the studies not free of charge, but it ended up being the case only when the studies are prolonged. What does it mean? The official length of the bachelor studies is three years, and two for the

master. There are some exceptions, for example architects have four years of bachelor and two years of master, doctors have six years together without a bachelor milestone. If somebody is not able to finish his studies on time, he has to pay the next years of his current degree. The same applies if he has already achieved one or more degrees of the same level (e.g. the first bachelor studies - free, another major is paid).

But what if somebody honestly studied, finished all of his classes but because of the mobility, could not finish his degree on time? Or what if some other needs a year off for an internship while having to stay enrolled? These exceptions were not implemented in the laws till last year. In 2017, The Student Council for Higher Education of Slovakia opened this topic in the discussion with the current government. The negotiations were successful, and the proposal was approved.

What was not expected was the reaction of the public. Many people complained about the lazy students who were paid from the public pocket. It seemed that more people see mobility as an opportunity for the “lazy students” to not work for another year and party all year long. The interesting part is that the same opinions were held not only by the older generations, but by the students, too. Some seemed outraged - “If I did finish my degree in three years, then anybody can!” they said. It often sounded just like envy.

I think making the extra year for free was the right decision. Many people also complain how young people start to work unprepared and inexperienced. I think a mobility program is the right way to improve its own language proficiency, problem solving and other hard and soft skills. The investment will definitely pay off for the person, and subsequently the community in the future.

My recommendations are to:

- Support the recognition of the study mobilities.
- Improve awareness about advantages of the mobilities.
- Allow the mobilities inclusion into the study programs.
- Focus on the quality of the international mobilities.