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WHY TO STUDY ABROAD? AN EXAMPLE OF CLUSTERING

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ABSTRACT: In the last decades in the Italian and European universities, there has been an increasing emphasis in all activities related to internationalization. These activities have gradually increased in terms of number of students and teachers involved, have become more complex and cover many aspects of the university education. The University of Bergamo has aligned, making internationalization one of the main guidelines for the future development. The purpose of this contribution is to analyse students' motivations and expectations regarding their study abroad experience. The authors have conducted an on-line survey addressed to a sample of about 1300 Italian students enrolled in the University of Bergamo. To assess the results of the survey, we propose a mapping of the response variables using the *VOSviewer* software.

KEYWORDS: Student mobility, Questionnaire, *VOSviewer*, Variables' mapping.

1 Introduction

In the last decades, an increasing number of European students has spent at least a semester abroad during their university studies. Since it began in 1987-88, the world's most successful student mobility programme, the Erasmus programme, has provided over three million European students with the opportunity to go abroad and study at a higher education institution or train in a company (European Commission, 2014). Also looking at data on students enrolled outside their country of citizenship, the growth in the internationalisation of tertiary education is substantial, from 0.8 million worldwide in 1975 to 4.3 million in 2011 (OECD, 2014).

Previous studies on the field of education abroad have mainly focused on the factors influencing the intent to spend a period of study abroad or on the effects of mobility on the skills and the later employability (see, among others, Di Pietro, Page, 2008; Luo, Jamieson-Drake, 2015; Parey, Waldinger, 2010; Rodrigues, 2013).

Our purpose is to analyse students' motivations and the fulfillment of expectations regarding their study abroad experience. We have conducted an on-line survey addressed to a sample of about 1300 Italian students enrolled in a medium size university of the North of the country: the University of Bergamo. Our sample is composed by all the credit mobility experiences done by the students during the last six academic years (from a.y. 2008/2009 to 2013/2014). Besides survey's

results, for each student, we have administrative information collected at enrolment (age, gender, region of residence, etc.) and data on students' academic career.

We analyse the students' answers using an approach based on the variables' mapping. Our results show that, in the perception of the international mobile students, personal development is the most important outcome of their international experience. Improvement of language skills, curiosity about different cultures and potential career benefits are factors that motivate the choice of mobility abroad, but their importance differ according to the students' field of study. Our survey ask the students to compare the experience abroad to previous experience in Italy in terms of teaching and assessment methods, and average exams evaluation. Focussing on teaching methods, our results emphasize in particular the greater interactivity and the teamwork approach adopted by the foreign universities.

Section 2 describes questionnaire and sample, section 3 presents the results of the survey through a mapping of the response and section 4 offers some conclusions.

2 Sample and Questionnaire

To assess the experience abroad of the students of the University of Bergamo we prepared a questionnaire consisting of three sections: *Decision to study abroad*, *Experience abroad* and *Coming back to Bergamo*. Before these three parts, we ask a few questions regarding the student's personal details: parents' level of education, parents' employment status, previous experience abroad of him/herself or family, the current employment status of the respondent, the academic year and the number of semesters spent abroad, the type of internationalization program.

In the first section "*Decision to study abroad*", we ask the students to respond on the factors motivating their decision to study abroad (i.e. to make the CV more impressive, to improve a foreign language, to live a new experience) and to choose the host country and university (i.e. compatibility with studies, prestige of host city and university, knowledge of the language and culture of the host country).

In second section "*Experience abroad*", we ask the students to compare the experience abroad to the previous experience in Bergamo in terms of required linguistic abilities, teaching and assessment methods, average exam evaluation and so on. In the same section, we ask also about the main sources of funding and the need to have a job during the experience abroad.

Finally, in the third section "*Coming back to Bergamo*", the respondents were ask to evaluate the problems in aligning the progress in university, the time spent for the study, to evaluate the impact of studying abroad on communication skills, linguistic ability, ability to work in team. We ask also about the satisfaction of expectations with regard to the possibility to have a better job in the future, personal growth and interpersonal skills. For each question, there are three/four possible answers generally measured with an ordinal scale.

Our survey involves 1299 students and former students, which spent one/two semesters abroad for an Erasmus or Extra EU program over the last 6 academic years (from 2008-09 to 2013-14). We consider the students belonging to all six departments of the Bergamo's University: Engineering (103 students), Foreign

Languages (667 students), Social Sciences (68 students), Law (50 students), Art (53 students) and Economics (358 students). After more than one reminder, the response rate is approximately 47%.

3 VOSviewer and results

To assess the results of our survey we propose a mapping of the response variables using the VOSviewer software. VOSviewer is a free software created by N. J. van Eck and L. Waltman ten years ago, constantly updated by the authors and downloadable from the website www.vosviewer.com. The aim of VOS (visualization of similarities) is to provide a low dimensional visualization in which items are located in such a way that the distance between any pair of variables reflects their similarity as accurately as possible. Variables that have a high similarity should be located close to each other, whereas variables that have a low similarity should be located far away from each other (van Eck, Waltman, 2007).

In a VOS map, each variable is indicated by a circle whose dimension depends on the occurrences - in this context the number of students responding in a high level. The link's strength depends on the co-occurrences – the number of students responding in a high level to both variables of a pair (van Eck, Waltman, 2010).

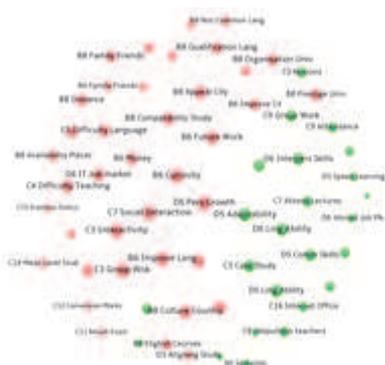


Figure 1: All respondents

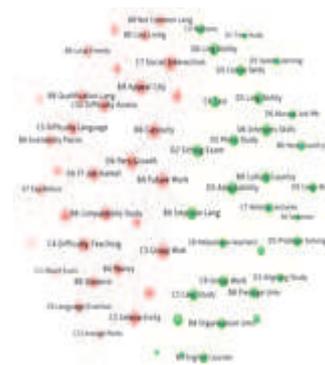


Figure 2: Only graduate respondents

Figure 1 and 2 present the results for all the respondents and for the sub-group of graduate students respectively. The map of Figure 1 shows a small group of items strictly linked and with a high number of occurrences. The linkages show that, in the decision to study abroad, the students are mainly motivated by the aim to improve language skills and live new experiences (item B6). The most important outcome of the international mobility experience is personal growth (item D6). The other items linked in the group belong to the second section of the questionnaire “*The experience abroad*” and point out that interactivity and group work are the teaching methods characterising the foreign universities in comparison to Bergamo University (item C3). Overall, these findings seem to highlight a context in which

the experience abroad is perceived by the students as an opportunity to develop their competences in the area of interpersonal and intercultural learning (a confirmation is the importance of item C7, social interaction as the best way to improve the knowledge of the foreign language).

These general results find support when we look at specific groups of mobility students, and are enriched by specific items. Figure 2 shows, as an example, the subgroup of graduate students. All the previous results are confirmed but the additional item of enhancing their employability (item B6) emerges as an important motivation to study abroad.

4 Conclusions

Studying abroad has become an important phenomenon and is a focus area of higher education policy in Europe. Research in this area may contribute to the debate regarding the effects on the skills and the employability and the reasons for countries and for public and private institutions to facilitate the international student mobility.

Our general results show that to study abroad is perceived first of all as an opportunity of personal development besides of professional and academic improvement. Further analysis of specific groups of students is needed to better understand the phenomenon.

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