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UNVEILING THE FACTORS OF STUDENT MOBILITY: THE CASE STUDY OF ARMENIA

The increase of international student mobility for many countries is a significant opportunity and for some it might become a weakness, if the development is not addressed wisely by policy makers. There is a trend of one way mobility flows from smaller, economically less developed to more developed countries, which might put the formers under the risk of brain drain. This is especially risky for the relatively smaller developing countries (e.g. Armenia), where on the one hand the development of human capital and global integration is vital and on the other hand the drain of skilled human resources hinders the economic development. Concrete policy actions are vital for restructuring the mobility flow and ensuring the reality of brain circulation.

By clarifying the major pushing and pulling factors influencing the decision of Armenian students to seek overseas education (which is the primary objective of this research paper), this study will be valuable for further policy, strategy and marketing instrument development on institutional, national and international levels.

The study employed quantitative research methods using an online survey distributed among the target audience. The findings include number of pushing and pulling factors influencing on the decision of Armenian students to pursue education abroad, as well as the major obstacles hindering the mobility flow.

Key words: Higher education administration, student mobility, push factors, pull factors, quantitative study.

Introduction

In 1950s the worldwide number of students studying abroad is estimated to have been about 200 000 (Wells 2014), whereas in 2012 the number of internationally mobile students was 4.5 million (OECD 2014) and there are estimates that the number of overseas students will grow to 8 million by 2020 (Altbach 2004). During 2005–12 the number of foreign tertiary students enrolled worldwide increased by 50% (OECD 2015).

The implementation of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) by the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, which included education as one of the 12 service sectors and recognized it as a tradable service, has given a significant boost to this cross-border higher education movement (UNESCO 2012).

The largest portions of the student mobility gain the English-speaking destinations, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. Within EHEA, the countries with high shares of incoming mobile and outgoing mobile students studying abroad are Ireland, Norway, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, while the countries with high shares of incoming mobile students and low shares of outgoing mobile students are United Kingdom and Denmark. On the contrast there are number of countries with low shares of incoming, as well as low shares of outgoing mobile students (compared to EHEA average), in particular Ukraine, Turkey, Poland, Slovenia, Kazakhstan, Armenia (Grabher et al. 2014).

The secondary statistical analysis, based on data from the UNESCO – Institute for Statistics on (long-term) degree mobility of students in tertiary education outlines the presence and distribution of mobile students in the EHEA. It analyses imbalanced mobility flows across EHEA countries from a national, bilateral and a regional perspective (Grabher et al. 2014).

Recent studies indicate that in-bounding student mobility has become an issue for several economically developing and non-Anglophone countries (Altbach & Knight 2007). The trend of mobility flows from economically less developed to more developed countries (with sound educational systems and future employment opportunities) put the formers under pressure and at risk of brain drain. This is especially risky for the relatively smaller developing countries (e.g. Armenia), where on the one hand the development of human capital and global integration is vital and on the other hand the drain of skilled human resources hinders the economic development.

Literature Review

The literature points out number of factors that may affect international student mobility.

OECD report (OECD 2016) highlights the importance of the following factors underlying the decisions of internationally mobile students: language of instruc-

tion, quality of programmes, tuition fees, immigration policy, other factors (recognition of foreign degrees and workload carried out abroad; the quality and admission policies of tertiary education in the home country; future opportunities to come back to work in the home country; and cultural aspirations).

Another research suggests on the key choice factors for mobile students are, in order, country (54 per cent), course (18 per cent), institution (17 per cent) and city (10 per cent) (Marginson 2006). Number of other researchers (e.g. (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002a), (Rosa Becker 2012), (Bhati & Anderson 2012), (Kondakci 2011), (Park 2009) etc.) have studied the factors underlying the decision of studying abroad and engaging in international mobility for several concrete countries, particularly concentrating on pushing (out from the home country) and pulling (attracting to host country) factors. The findings of the mentioned studies on both push and pull factors affecting student motivation to study abroad, as well as choice of study destination varies substantially from country to country. While some of the studies underline the importance of economic rationales and factors, there are also studies arguing the importance of cultural, geographical, historical, and political rationales as more prominent (Kondakci 2011), especially for developing countries.

The study of four countries, including Taiwan, Indonesia, China and India reveal four major push factors influencing the students' decision to pursue education abroad: the perception that an overseas course of study is better than a local one, students' ability to gain entry to local programs (difficult access to particular study programs), a desire to gain a better understanding of the 'West' and an intention to migrate after graduation (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002b).

Based on another study outcomes of the Indian students' international study motivations the major pulling factors where to gain an international experience (69.5%) by interacting with students from other nationalities, countries and cultures, employment opportunities (52.5%) (Bhati & Anderson 2012).

In comparison of 4 study destinations (US, UK, China and Australia) of Korean students expectations for Australian universities were distinctly different from those of the other three countries' universities. Students who preferred to go to Australia expected Australia to be an "exciting place to live", with a "safe environment (low crime rate)", "comfortable climate and surroundings. They also had high expectations for "improving second language proficiency", however, expectations for "curriculum excellence", "high job opportunity after graduation", "renown faculty members", and "high reputation of school" were significantly lower than other three countries studied in the research (Park 2009).

The research on post-soviet countries revealing pushing and pulling factors of student mobility is quite limited. This research examines major pushing factors that underlie the decisions of Armenian students to pursue education abroad and focuses on the international vertical (degree mobility) and horizontal (credit) mobility and will be valuable for further national policy development both for Armenia, as well as for post-soviet developing countries comparable to Ar-

menia. The study is devoted to only formal education.

The clarification of specific national pulling and pushing factors will be useful for policy makers to further capitalize on when developing national and institutional policies, strategies and marketing instruments for attracting not only international students, but also for attracting back Armenian/national students (after their studies abroad) and preventing the brain drain.

Research questions

What are the main factors influencing the decision of Armenian students to study abroad?

Which are the major obstacles hindering the mobility flow?

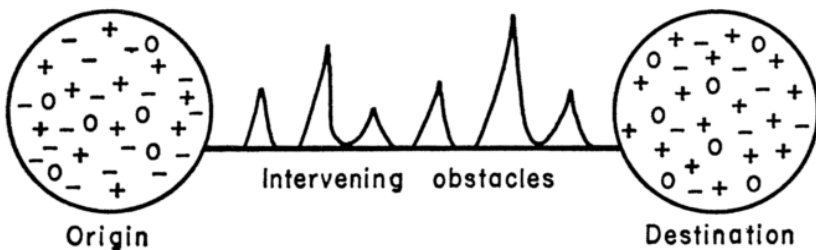
Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of the study is the “Theory of Migration” (Lee 1966), which originally was developed to explain the decision to migrate and the process of migration. The model was then extensively used to explore student migration and international movement, the pushing and pulling factors affecting students’ decisions.

Lee argues that in every area there are countless factors which act to hold people within the area or attract people to it, and there are others which tend to repel them. Furthermore, between every two points there stands a set of intervening obstacles which may be slight in some instances and insurmountable in others (Lee 1966).

Picture 1. Origin and destination Factors and intervening obstacles in migration (Source: (Lee 1966))

ORIGIN AND DESTINATION FACTORS AND INTERVENING OBSTACLES IN MIGRATION



The author divides the factors under four headings, in particular: Factors associated with the area of origin (in the study we will use the term “pushing factors”),

Factors associated with the area of destination (in the study we will use the term “pulling factors”),

Intervening obstacles,

Personal factors.

The abovementioned factors cover the two research questions of this study in terms of clarification of pulling and pushing factors, as well as obstacles hindering the mobility flow.

Research methods

Quantitative research methods, in particular an empirical investigation through distribution of online questionnaires within selected sample, the collection and analysis of data was the major method employed to quantify and generalize the results to specific population. The data for the population under study is taken from the UNESCO data Centre (UIS), which provides internationally comparable statistics in the area of student mobility. The term “Internationally mobile students (or mobile students)” is defined as “students who have crossed a national border and moved to another country with the objective of studying” (UIS 2012). By the UIS data covering The Republic of Armenia the average (for the period of 2011–2015) number of outbound internationally mobile students is 7243. The sample size is calculated based on the mentioned population size: with 5% error margin and 90% confidence interval the estimated sample size is 261.

Respondents (individuals having international study experience) were reached randomly through different channels (including, but not limited to online platforms, university international offices etc.) that have filled in an online questionnaire. The ratio of completed surveys and the number of people contacted was 45 %, which yielded 264 total responses (24 flawed responses were removed). The 7 % of respondents was aged between 17–20, 30% was aged between 21–24, another 25% was aged between 25–28 and 38 % was 29 years old and above. 59 % of respondent was female and 41 % was male. 63 % of respondents engaged in the master level mobility, 19% of respondents studied abroad in the bachelor level and another 18% in the doctorate level. Although the selection of respondents was random, it is observed almost equal distribution of responses between the students who currently study abroad (58%) and respondents who has already completed (42%).

The survey distributed among the respondents through virtual channels consisted of four major sections based on the theoretical framework of the study: (i) factors associated with the country of origin, (ii) factors associated with the area of destination, (iii) intervening obstacles, and (iv) personal factors.

Findings

It is worth mentioning, that among number of other factors given as an option in the questionnaire the factors associated with the quality of education and

scholarship/financial assistance availability are selected as significant in both cases: pushing and pulling factors (country and institutional level).

The findings of this study confirm the indication of Philip G. Altbach on the importance of perceived value of foreign degrees in many parts of the world. The recognition of the international degrees/qualifications in Armenia was among the major pulling factors of respondents. As the author states, “industrialized country is a considerable advantage in the job market” (Altbach 1991). The respondents denote other factors in the open ended responses and in most of the cases those are also concerning the quality of education: the possibility to get practical knowledge and access the most recent developments in the area of studies, the possibility to “study within different universities and gain wider knowledge on western academic culture”, “availability of quality education in the field of previous degree” where noted by the respondents as other factors nor covered by the provided scale.

3. The Major Obstacles

As stated above, among the major pushing factors were emphasized the availability of scholarships and financial assistance (EU funded mobility windows, DAAD, Fulbright, Inter-governmental agreements etc). The availability of scholarship/financial aid as a major pulling factor (provided by the host country and institution) was also given a high significance by the respondents. This implication is later confirmed when observing the major obstacles hindering the mobility flow (Table1, Chart 5): the respondents were asked to choose three major obstacles they have encountered before the mobility period and the factor of financial issues emerged as the most important, which could repel Armenian students to engage in international experience (22 %).

Separation from family, Visa issues, Problems with accommodation in the host country and expected additional financial burden were given almost the same importance and where chosen by the 12%, 10%, 10%, 9% of respondents respectively. Most of the other factors (out 17) gain less than 5 percent importance.

Table 1. The major obstacles

Factor	%	N
Financial issues	22	152
Parents didn't allow to study abroad	2	15
Lack of information about the destination country	3	18
Lack of information about higher education institutions of the destination country	3	22
Lack of programs taught in English in the destination country	4	25
Poor communication of the university staff members	3	24
Visa issues	10	70
Insufficient skills in foreign languages	5	34

Difficulties in getting information	5	36
Problems with accommodation in the host country	10	67
Separation from family, partner, children, friends	12	80
Loss of social benefits	2	15
Loss of opportunity to earn money	5	38
Expected additional financial burden	9	64
Lack of personal drive	1	6
Problems with recognition of results achieved in host country	2	12
Limited admittance to the preferred institution in host country	2	16
	100	694

Better employment prospects and higher remuneration levels were given significant importance by the majority of respondents, which indirectly reflects the current reality of the labor market in Armenia: the market is filling in the skill gap by hiring employees with western education, although not always the expectation of students for higher salary is met. “The mismatch between what higher education provides and what is needed to grow economies lies in part in outdated content, but the wider and more telling gap is in mastering the process skills—such as reasoning, problem solving, team work, effective communication, creativity, and risk-taking—necessary to effectively lead economic growth. Rather than responding to market demand, universities offer education in specializations for which there is funding. For example, many systems turn out large numbers of teachers, although teachers may make up a significant proportion of unemployed” (Manuk Hergnyan n.d.).

Drawing parallels and comparing the findings in this section with those of pushing and pulling sections the gap between the labor market and education is becoming vivid (Table 2).

Table 2. Student quality expectations and future employment prospects

Push Factors	Pull Factors	Personal Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The underdevelopment of study area: 66 % (174 respondents) gave the highest three scores • The high perceived value of foreign degrees in Armenia: 57 % gave the highest three scores 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The higher quality and reputation of education in the host country: 61% strongly agreed the factor to be the most important • The recognition of the international degrees/ qualifications in Armenia: 30% strongly agreed the factor to be the most important 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring a high salary level during the future employment: 61 % gave the highest three scores

Brain drain or brain circulation?

As presented in the methodology section, 58 % of respondents currently study abroad (see chart 7) and 42 has completed studies. Out of 58% (153) respondents currently pursuing education abroad, 59% is confident that will return back home, 35% is yet uncertain and 6% is not planning to return at all. The 42 % of respondents, who have already completed studies abroad (111 respondents) 83% has already returned and 17% reported, that hasn't returned to Armenia after their studies. In the open ended responses one of the respondents has highlighted, that “We must strongly work on bringing students who have studied abroad back to Armenia and of ensuring their employment opportunities here – this is now of utmost importance, otherwise it is a mere brain drain”. Countries that “export” students to other countries for studying purposes risk losing, permanently, many of their talented citizens (what is commonly known as “brain drain”); but the fact that many developing countries sponsor a number of international students suggests that at least some of these students will return to their home country or establish social and business links between their home and host countries, developing what some authors call “brain circulation” (OECD 2015).

Conclusions

Basing this study on the Theory of Migration (Lee 1966), literature on higher education internationalization and student mobility in particular, this quantitative study outlines the major factors influencing the decisions of Armenian students to engage in outbound mobility, as well as the major obstacles.

While the findings partially support conclusions of similar studies (e.g. (Bhati & Anderson 2012), (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002a), (Li & Marginson 2011), (Wilkins et al. 2012), (OECD 2015), etc.), it is also unique, as to our knowledge is the first study on push-pull factor analysis for a small developing economy like Armenia. Traditional push-pull model includes economic and political problems (Wilkins et al. 2012), whereas our study did not reveal those factors being prominent and the major push-pull factors where in the domain of the higher education quality, scholarship/financial aid availability and labor market prospects. The underdevelopment of study area is more frequently chosen as a major pushing factor which should serve as a signal for higher education administrators: there is an urgent need for restructuring, redesigning the current educational programs, as well as developing new areas.

Based on the analysis, the respondents think that the labor market values the foreign degrees and there are better prospects of high salary level in case of availability of international degrees. This is another call for the higher education providers to adjust the educational content in line with the labour market requirements and the global trends. As a major differentiation opportunity, the

students see the international study experience envisioning better employment prospects. Introduction of joint and dual degrees (within the university, national and international) and cross curricular cooperation, study programs developed in cooperation with the various industry players, could be a possibility for increasing the student employability and meeting the student expectations without leaving the country.

Armenia, being a developing country, will continuously loose in the battle for “brain” and the “drain” will be inevitable in case of complete absence of proactive strategies: the “brain drain” should be addressed by the policy makers and transposed with “brain circulation” policies. The higher education should not only be attractive for the Armenian nationals, but also for international students. Improved higher education quality and global integration through various cooperation formats will serve as a cornerstone and is a clear-cut precondition for the dynamic improvements in the economy and innovation.

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Արևիկ Օհանյան

*Եվրասիա միջազգային համալսարանի Որակի ապահովման կերպարների
ղեկավար, ԵՄՀ ասպիրանտ*

**ՈՒՍԱՆՈՂԱԿԱՆ ՇԱՐԺՈՒՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԳՈՐԾՈՆՆԵՐԻ
ԲԱՅԱՀԱՅՏՈՒՄԸ ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆԻ ՕՐԻՆԱԿՈՎ**

Մի շարք երկրների համար միջազգային ուսանողական շարժունակության աճը զգալի հնարավորություն է, մինչդեռ որոշ երկրների համար կարող է լինել ռիսկային, եթե զարգացումներին խելամտորեն չարձագանքեն քաղաքակրթության մշակողները: Փոքր, տնտեսապես առավել թերի զարգացած, զարգացող երկրներից միակողմանի ուսանողների հոսքը դեպի զարգացած երկրներ ուղեղների արտահոսքի է հանգեցնում: Այս իրականությունը հատկապես ռիսկային է հարաբերականորեն փոքրաթիվ բնակչությամբ զարգացող երկրների համար (օր.՝ Հայաստան), որտեղ մի կողմից մարդկային կապիտալի զարգացումը և համաշխարհային ինտեգրումը կենսական նշանակություն ունի, մյուս կողմից, մրցունակ մարդկային ռեսուրսների արտահոսքը խոչընդոտում է երկրի տնտեսական զարգացումը: Ուղղորդված քաղաքականություն է անհրաժեշտ ուսանող-

ների շարժունակության հոսքի վերաուղղորդման, և ուղեղի «շրջանառության» իրականությունն ապահովելու համար:

Արտերկրում կրթությունն ստանալու հայ ուսանողների որոշման վրա ազդող երկրից դուրս մղող (push) և ձգող (pull) գործոնների հստակեցումը (ինչը տվյալ հետազոտության առաջնային խնդիրն է) արժեքավոր կլինի ինստիտուցիոնալ, ազգային և միջազգային մակարդակներում հետազաքաղաքականության, ռազմավարության և մարկետինգային գործիքակազմի մշակման համար:

Տվյալ ուսումնասիրության համար կիրառվել են քանակական մեթոդներ: Արդյունքները ներառում են հայ ուսանողների արտերկրում սովորելու որոշման վրա ազդող մի շարք մղող (push) և ձգող (pull), ինչպես նաև անձնական (personal) գործոններ: Հստակեցվել են նաև շարժունակության հիմնական խոչընդոտները, որոնք ուսանողները համարում են առաջնային:

Հիմնաբաներ. բարձրագույն կրթության կառավարում, ուսանողների շարժունակություն, դուրս մղող գործոններ, ձգող գործոններ, քանակական հետազոտություն:

Արևիկ Օգանյան

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РАСКРЫТИЕ ФАКТОРОВ СТУДЕНЧЕСКОЙ МОБИЛЬНОСТИ НА ПРИМЕРЕ АРМЕНИИ

Для ряда стран рост международной студенческой мобильности является значительной возможностью, в то время как для некоторых стран это может быть рискованным, если разработчики политики не будут разумно реагировать на данные события. Односторонний поток студентов из малых, экономически слаборазвитых, развивающиеся стран в развитые страны приводит к утечке мозгов. Эта реальность особенно опасна для развивающихся стран с относительно небольшим количеством населения (например: Армения), где с одной стороны, жизненно важным является развитие человеческого капитала и глобальная интеграция, а с другой стороны, отток конкурентоспособных человеческих ресурсов препятствует экономическому развитию страны. Необходима целенаправленная политика для перенаправления потоков студенческой мобильности и обеспечения «оборота» мозгов.

Определение основных выталкивающих (push) и притягивающих (pull) факторов, влияющих на решение армянских студентов, желающих учиться за границей (что является основной задачей исследования), будет полезно для дальнейших разработок политики, стратегии и маркетинговых инструментов на институциональном, национальном и международном уровнях.

Для этого исследования использовались количественные методы. Результаты включают в себя ряд выталкивающих (push) и притягивающих (pull) факторов, а также субъективные (personal) факторы, влияющие на процесс принятия решений армянских студентов учиться за рубежом. Также разъясняются основные препятствия для мобильности, которые студенты считают приоритетными.

Ключевые слова: управление высшим образованием, мобильность студентов, выталкивающие факторы, притягивающие факторы, количественное исследование.

Հոդվածը ներկայացվել է գրախոսման՝ 2019թ. հունվարի 15-ին
Հոդվածն ընդունվել է տպագրության՝ 2019թ. փետրվարի 8-ին