

WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES TO STUDENT MOBILITY DURING THE DECISION AND PLANNING PHASE?¹

The EUROSTUDENT project collates comparable student survey data on the social dimension of European higher education, collecting data on a wide range of topics, e.g. the socio-economic background, living conditions, and temporary international mobility of students. The project strives to provide reliable and insightful cross-country comparisons. The data presented below stem from the fifth round of the EUROSTUDENT project (2012-2015).

Overview

In the different phases of the decision process, different obstacles may deter students from studying abroad. Financial and familial obstacles are of especially high relevance with regard to the initial decision to go abroad for study purposes. Students who are already planning to study abroad are more concerned about practical matters: integrating a stay abroad into their study programme, getting relevant information, securing a place in a mobility programme, and ensuring their results achieved abroad will be recognised.

Obstacles to student mobility

20 % of graduates from higher education should have experience of studying or training abroad – this is the policy goal endorsed at the Ministerial Conference of EHEA member states in 2009 (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009) which is still upheld today (EHEA Mobility Strategy, 2012).

Against the background of this mobility goal, the factors that may be deterring students from pursuing a study period abroad have been of interest to researchers and policy-makers in the past. Cross-nationally, research has consistently identified financial concerns, a reluctance to leave the social network in the home country, and a lack of general motivation as the main obstacles keeping students from studying abroad (Beerkens et al., 2015; Orr, 2012; Souto-Otero et al., 2013). However, the relevance of different obstacles may change according to the phase of the decisional process: Netz (2015) has demonstrated the impact of different factors in the *decision process* as opposed to the *planning process*. Building on such previous work, this Intelligence Brief examines obstacles to studying abroad using data collected in the newest EUROSTUDENT survey.

What are the main obstacles to student mobility? Can factors be identified which differ in their relevance between decision-making and planning process?

Figure 1: Assessment of obstacles for enrolment abroad by students with and without plans to study abroad (cross-country averages).

Students without plans to study abroad			Students with plans to study abroad		
%	Rank		%	Rank	Difference in rank between groups
63	1	Additional financial burden	58	1	→
47	2	Separation from partner, child(ren), friends	28	3	↓
31	3	Loss of paid job	22	7	↓
29	4	Insufficient skills in foreign language	22	8	↓
28	5	Difficult integration into structure of home study programme	25	4	↑
27	6	Lack of motivation	12	12	↓
24	7	Lack of information provided by home institution	28	2	↑
24	8	Low benefit for studies at home	16	11	↓
24	9	Problems with recognition of results achieved abroad	24	6	↑
20	10	Limited admittance to mobility programmes	25	5	↑
18	11	Problems with access regulations to the preferred country	19	9	↑
17	12	Insufficient marks for studying abroad	18	10	↑

Source: EUROSTUDENT V, K.14 and K.15. **No data:** AT, IT, DK. Lack of information: DE. Insufficient marks: DE, LT (no plans). Limited admittance: DE. Lack of motivation: RO (no plans), CH (plans). Difficult integration: CH. Problems with access regulations: DE.

Notes: Students assessed possible obstacles to studying abroad on a five-point scale ranging from “no obstacle” to “big obstacle”. Shares refer to students considering respective aspect as either (4) quite big or (5) big obstacle. Items and scale points may vary slightly by country (see Hauschildt et al., p. 190). “Students without plans to study abroad” are students who have not yet been enrolled abroad and do not plan to. “Students with plans to study abroad” are students who have not yet been enrolled abroad, but plan to.

What are the biggest obstacles in the decision phase?

The EUROSTUDENT survey covers 12 potential obstacles to student mobility (see Fig. 1). Looking at the group of students who have not been abroad for study and who have no plans to do so gives insight into which obstacles are the most relevant in preventing a *decision* to study abroad (Fig. 1). What keeps these students from deciding to study abroad?

The two largest obstacles that students without plans for study abroad rate most highly are the “additional financial burden”, which is rated to be a (quite) big obstacle by on average 63 % of these students, as well as the “separation from partner, children, and friends” (47%). These obstacles present the two most often named obstacles for students without plans for study abroad in 20 of the 27 EUROSTUDENT countries with available data. Only in Croatia, France, Georgia, Hungary, Ireland, Switzerland, and Ukraine are other aspects among the top two most important obstacles: “insufficient skills in foreign language” (FR, GE, HU, UA), “lack of motivation” (CH), “problems with recognition of results achieved abroad” (HR), or “loss of paid job” (IE).

On cross-country average, “loss of paid job” and “insufficient skills in foreign language” represent the third- and fourth-most highly rated obstacles among students without plans for study abroad. For 31 % of students not planning to study abroad, (fear of) losing their job poses a (quite) big obstacle, and 29 % of students judge their lack of language skills to hinder a possible study period abroad.

The fifth place, among students without plans for study abroad, is taken by a (feared or experienced) “difficult integration into the home study programme”. On average, 28 % of students without plans to study abroad see this as an obstacle.

A general “lack of motivation”, the sixth obstacle (judged by cross-country averages), is rated by 27 % of students without plans to go abroad to be a (quite) big obstacle. All remaining obstacles are rated to be of lower relevance and present an obstacle to at most 24% of students who are not planning to go abroad.

Overall, these results show that obstacles that are related to students’ background, i.e., their financial and family situation as well as individual skills and assessments, are of high relevance for the initial decision to study abroad.

What are the biggest obstacles in the planning phase?

All obstacles which were most important for students in the decision phase (in the top half of Fig. 1) are of less relevance for students with plans to go abroad than for students not planning studies abroad: the average shares of students who rate them to be a (quite) big obstacle are at least 3 percentage points lower. Other obstacles, however, clearly gain importance for students in the planning phase.

The “additional financial burden” remains the most important obstacle in the group of students planning to go, with 58 % of them assessing it as problematic. These values hardly represent a change from the group of students not planning to go: the average drops somewhat from 63 % to 58 %. However, this pattern is reversed in single countries (Fig. 2).

Among students who are planning a study period abroad, a “lack of information provided by the home institution” becomes – on average – the second-largest obstacle, although the share of students rating this aspect as a quite (big) obstacle is only slightly higher (28 %) than among students without plans to go.

The second-most often named obstacle among students not planning to go abroad, the “separation from partner, children and friends”, which was rated to be a problem by slightly less than half of these students, takes the third place among students who are planning to go abroad and is only a (quite) big obstacle for 28%.

Fourth, fifth and sixth rank among students with plans to enrol abroad – on average – are taken by aspects that present obstacles to the realisation of a study period abroad: “difficult integration into structure of home study programme” (25 %), “limited admittance to mobility programmes” (25 %), and “problems with the recognition of results achieved abroad” (24 %).

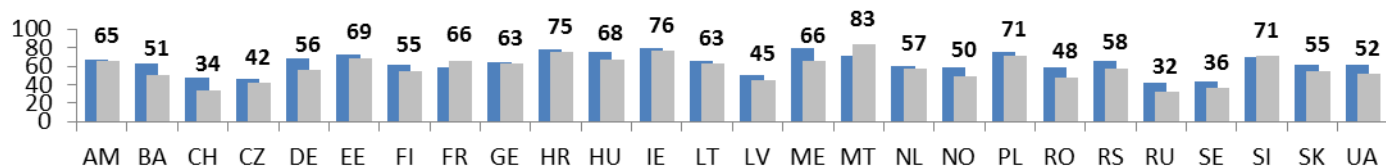
While students *without* plans to study abroad were the least concerned about “problems with access regulations to the preferred country” and “insufficient marks to study abroad”, obstacles on the ranks 11 and 12 among students *with* plans to study abroad are a perceived “low benefit for studies at home” (16 %) and a “lack of motivation” (12 %).

In summary, for students currently in the planning phase of a study period abroad, obstacles related to students’ study programmes and higher education institutions seem to gain importance, while obstacles related to students’ background are less relevant.

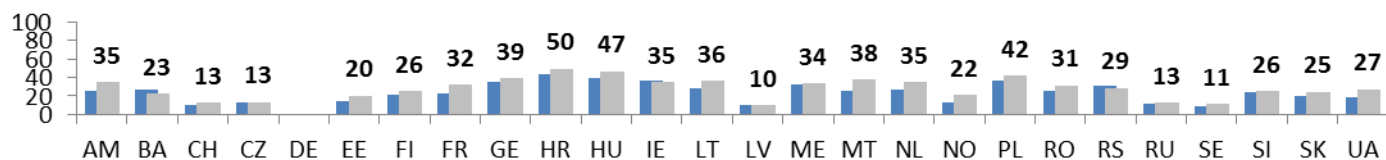
Country specific results – Obstacles in the planning phase

Figure 2: Selected obstacles to enrolment abroad presenting a (quite) big obstacle for students with(out) plans to study abroad.

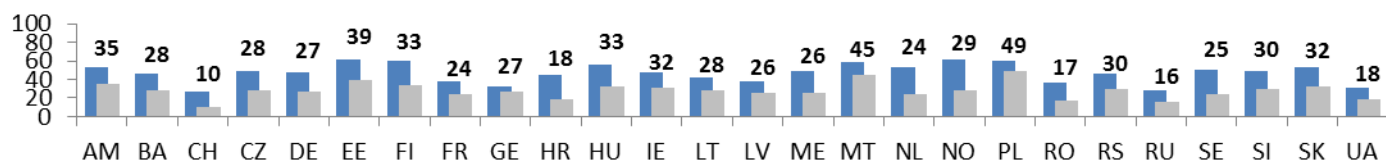
Additional financial burden



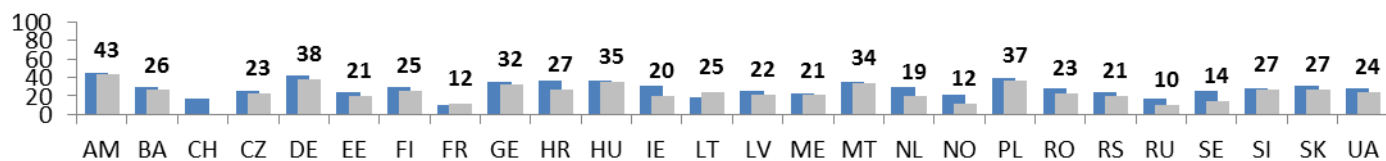
Lack of information provided by home institution



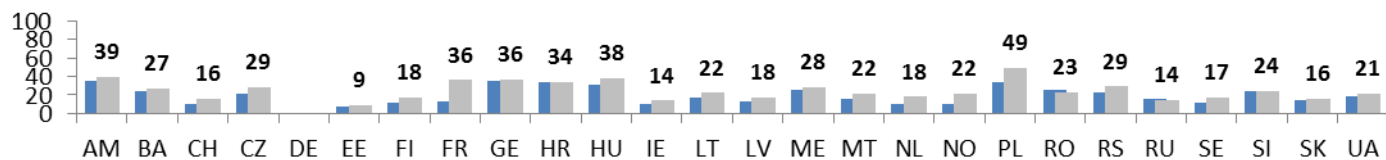
Separation from partner, child(ren) and friends



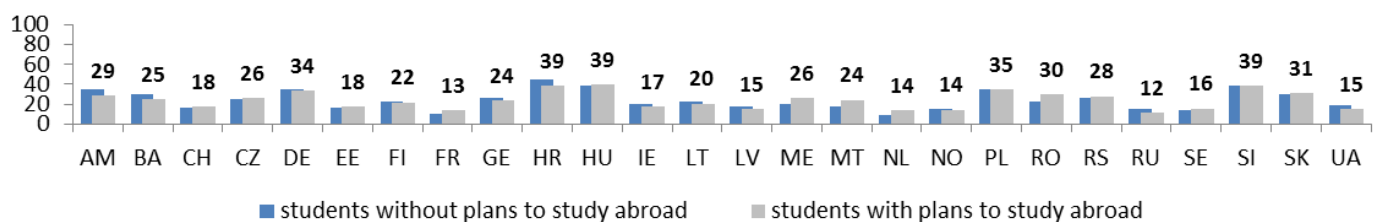
Difficult integration into structure of home study programme



Limited admittance to mobility programmes (of home/host institution)



Problems with recognition of results achieved abroad



■ students without plans to study abroad ■ students with plans to study abroad

Source: EUROSTUDENT V, K.14 and K.15. **No data:** AT, IT, DK. Lack of information: DE. Difficult integration: CH (students with plans). Limited admittance: DE.

Notes: Students assessed possible obstacles to studying abroad on a five-point scale ranging from “no obstacle” to “big obstacle”. Numbers indicate share of students with plans to enrol abroad considering respective aspect as either (4) quite big or (5) big obstacle. Obstacles represent top six obstacles for students with plans to enrol abroad (unweighted cross-country average, see Fig. 1). “Students without plans to study abroad” are students who have not yet been enrolled abroad and do not plan to. “Students with plans to study abroad” are students who have not yet been enrolled abroad, but plan to.

Across countries, the obstacles associated with planning a temporary enrolment abroad are rated differently (Fig. 2). The “additional financial burden” is the most commonly named obstacle, affecting between 32 % and 83 % of students with plans. The largest shares of students rating a lack of funds as problematic can be found in Croatia, Ireland, Malta, Poland, and Slovenia, where more than 70 % of students planning to go abroad rate this to be a (quite) big obstacle.

“Lack of information”, on average an obstacle for 28 % of students with plans to go abroad, and the second most important obstacle in this group of students overall, is – against the cross-country trend – rated to be an obstacle more often by students not planning to go in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ireland, and Serbia. Among students planning to go, it is especially often rated to be an obstacle in Armenia, Croatia, Georgia, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Malta, and Poland, where it affects between 35 % and 50 % of students with plans.

A “separation from family and friends”, while less of an obstacle for students already planning an enrolment than for those not planning to go abroad in all countries, is still problematic for up to almost half of all students in this group in some countries. In Armenia, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Malta, and Poland, it is a concern for at least a third of planning students.

“Difficult integration into the structure of home study programme”, the obstacle ranked in fourth place among planning students, seems to be more influential for the decision to study abroad than for planning such a stay in most countries, as it is rated more highly among students without than among students with plans for study abroad in all countries except Lithuania and France.

“Limited admittance to study programmes”, compared to students without plans, keeps or gains importance for students in the planning phase in all countries except Romania and Russia. It presents a (quite) big obstacle for more than a third of students planning to study abroad in Armenia, Croatia, France, Georgia, Hungary, and Poland, whereas less than 15 % of students with plans in Estonia, Ireland, and Russia share this view.

“Problems with recognition of results achieved abroad” is – on average – rated to be a (quite) big obstacle by the same share of students in both groups. In Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia, it is more of an obstacle for students who do not plan to go (at least 5 percentage points difference). In Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, and Romania, more students *with* plans for study abroad perceive recognition issues to be an obstacle.

Implications for higher education policy

The results show that obstacles to studying abroad indeed have different relevance in the different stages of the decision process. Students who do not want to study abroad rate financial and familial obstacles especially highly, indicating that these obstacles hold special relevance for the initial decision to go abroad for study purposes. Besides doubts about their own linguistic readiness for studying abroad, a lack of motivation also presents a deterring factor. Students in the planning phase also face financial obstacles and have doubts about leaving their friends and family behind. However, the other main concerns of these students relate to more practical matters: integrating a stay abroad into their study programme, getting relevant information, securing a place in a mobility programme, and ensuring their results achieved abroad will be recognised.

These findings highlight that different strategies may be effective in supporting students in the different stages of the decision process. In order to motivate students not (yet) planning to go – besides ensuring financial support is available – ways of lowering the social costs, e.g. through shorter or intermittent mobility arrangements, and/or increasing the perceived value of mobility as well as the students’ assessment that they can master a study period abroad could be effective. Measures addressing the decision-related obstacles may be especially relevant in order to increase the share of mobile students among groups previously underrepresented in mobility, e.g. students without higher education background (see e.g. Hauschildt et al., 2015; Netz 2015).

Despite the different assessment of several obstacles, students who are already planning to study abroad still rate financial matters to be the biggest obstacle. However, these students need less convincing regarding the value of mobility – rather, they can be supported to overcome informational deficits and organisational issues. Existing initiatives at the national level and the individual higher education institutions might provide valuable information and help them overcome these matters, for example by building designated mobility windows into study programmes (Ferencz et al., 2013).

EUROSTUDENT V

There are other important questions when it comes to students' mobility: How many students have international study or work experience? Are there differences between student groups? How do students organise and fund their enrolment abroad? The comparative report "[Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe](#)" (2015) provides insight into these questions. Furthermore, the [EUROSTUDENT database](#) allows users to explore country data by topic area and in comparison between countries. Also visit www.eurostudent.eu



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Country abbreviations

AM = Armenia	GE = Georgia	NO = Norway
BA = Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (without Republic Srpska and District Brčko)	HR = Croatia	PL = Poland
CH = Switzerland	HU = Hungary	RO = Romania
CZ = Czech Republic	IE = Ireland	RS = Serbia
DE = Germany	LT = Lithuania	RU = Russia
EE = Estonia	LV = Latvia	SE = Sweden
FI = Finland	ME = Montenegro	SI = Slovenia
FR = France	MT = Malta	SK = Slovakia
	NL = Netherlands	UA = Ukraine

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