

## Higher Education and Student Mobility in Scandinavian Discourse

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**Abstract. Purpose:** Today, with the demand of a knowledge-based society to adapt its workforce to modern, flexible and innovative production, the mobility of students has become an integral part of the European education system. The article offers a comparative analysis of the historical background, evaluation of the present situation, principles, and new political initiatives on accessibility in the tertiary education systems of countries in the North European region. The Nordic context is the most important for the development of student mobility and accessibility to tertiary education because these countries have gained unique experience in this sphere, creating democratic, free, and equal systems of tertiary education that exist as a component of lifelong learning. **Materials and Methods:** Multiple sources in European and Scandinavian educational environments at various time points from 1990 to 2022 have been used in the data collection for this study. By means of a case study approach that includes qualitative methods of analytical induction and generalization, a "contextualized comparison" has been carried out to identify characteristic features of students' mobility in institutions of higher learning in the Nordic region and to explore the process in chronological order. **Results:** Students' mobility in Europe and worldwide requires a substantial adjustment at the legislative, structural, and contextual levels. Based on a comparative analysis of the policy features in historical retrospective, the author has substantiated postmodern initiatives that influence the construction of an efficient high education model accessible for all.

**Keywords:** *students' mobility, lifelong learning, Nordic dimension, accessibility, institutions of higher learning, comparative analysis.*

**Introduction.** Nordic cultural and educational cooperation has a long history and is tied to the common values of the welfare state, in which free and accessible higher education is regarded as an important component and a public good [3].

The reasons for mobility in the Nordic area have changed throughout time, and mobility patterns have historically been unequal among the Nordic nations, with Iceland and Norway having the most students going out of the country. Cooperation through the Nordic Council of Ministers has evolved through time, with the 1971 cooperation agreement laying the groundwork for most of the subsequent progress. Following the 1991 action plan, the admittance agreement between all Scandinavian (or Nordic) countries was reached in 1996 [4].

The next step in the development of Nordic cooperation in tertiary education has become with the Bologna Declaration. The Bologna Process is often referred to as one of the key processes in higher education in Europe. The process itself is primarily structured in the form of communiqués that are formed as a statement in the Lisbon Recognition Convention. This convention covers the right of EU students to admission into any European tertiary institution of any kind. As Denmark, Sweden, and Finland have been adopted as European Union members, the Bologna Process in 1999 and the EU Lisbon agenda in 2000 have raised questions about the dynamics of Nordic and European collaboration [2].

The Bologna Process is seen as a multinational and inter-governmental process. EU efforts, notably in the field of higher education, have also increased. Student mobility has been an important goal in the European Union, owing largely to the success of the Erasmus student exchange program. Examining mobility trends reveals a significant increase in the number of students studying abroad in the EU, as well as an increase in Nordic students studying in EU countries [14]. These movement trends, however, have also been documented in the Nordic nations.

**The aims of the study.** This research is based on the evaluation project of the Nordic Agreement on students' admission to higher education, which was conducted by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The study goal is to provide a description and a mapping of Nordic student mobility in internal and external contexts, as well as conduct an estimation of the Nordic agreement effect on students' admission to

higher education.

**Brief overview of publications on the topic.** To contextualize mobility patterns within the Nordic countries, we have examined research studies of Ahola S., Hedmo T., Thomsen J.-P., Vabø A. These experts see Nordic nations as one region with a lot of parallels that have emerged in the previous 50 years, such as fast development of systems in terms of student numbers as well as institutions, a concentration on educational expenditure, and higher education as a primary justification for welfare states [1]. Whereas Michelsen S. and Stenstrom M.L. analyze not only similarities, but also some rather important differences, with Denmark and Finland on one hand, that still have a much more strictly binary system, and on the other Sweden, and Norway with a more unified higher education sector [7]. Elken M., Hovdhaugen E. and Wiers J.J. examine the qualification structures and number of students in recent years, focusing on the access and admission procedures in the various Nordic countries [4]. Furthermore, Maassen P., Nokkala T., and Uppström T.-M evaluate policies relating to student mobility and internationalization to determine if student mobility has been a significant goal and, if so, to what degree it has been an aim in the reform [5].

### Results and discussion

#### *Section 1. The notion of mobility in historical dimension*

The notion of students' mobility has been widely used since the 1970s in Scandinavian countries. At first, mobility was rated as a student exchange. Since the Lisbon declaration, this concept has got a much wider meaning, representing the aspect of full degree mobility. Moreover, in the Nordic region of the contemporary epoch, mobility is linked to the fact that it is not a goal in itself, but should be seen as a means for more cooperation and collaboration between welfare states [6]. As such, Nordic countries promote the need to be open and flexible to all kinds of exchange.

Historically, the mobility patterns and trajectories have differed in the Nordic countries. These differences can still be identified in the postmodern area, and in some cases, they have even increased over time.

For example, Iceland is a small country, but it has a much higher proportion of students abroad than any other Nordic country, and almost half of the Icelandic mobile students go

to other Nordic countries. Sweden and Norway have the highest number of mobile students. Norway has the most students studying abroad in other Nordic countries, particularly Denmark, as the two countries were twin kingdoms for a long time [7]. Except for Sweden, there is a mismatch between the number of students who leave and those who return. With the exception of Finland, which prefers Sweden, Denmark gets significantly more students than it sends out, and it is the preferred Nordic destination for students from all Nordic nations. Norway, Finland, and Iceland all send out far more students than they get [11].

The mobility of students is explained not only by the students' desire to study in another country, but also to learn a subject at a higher or different level. Some subject areas are more popular for international study than others. We discover that some programs with high admissions competition are more appealing to Nordic candidates from other countries (i.e., business, arts, and medicine). The attraction of these areas can be explained by the intense rivalry for study spaces in the home country, paired with the Nordic region's ease of movement. Another case in point is business administration, with Copenhagen Business School being a popular choice for students from Norway and Sweden [12]. Since the turn of the century, the number of Nordic students studying in other Nordic states has increased. The reasons behind this are multifaceted and cannot be attributed to a single factor. We consider that among the basic reasons may be the following: language, cultural linkages, route dependencies, ease of admission, local domestic prospects in selected fields, changes in the labor market and workforce payments, quality, competence requirements, and so on. Every factor can play a role in the decision-making process [5].

The conducted analysis demonstrates that this Nordic students' mobility pattern is related to the fact that the higher education systems in Norway and Iceland are relatively young, and as a result, students have to travel abroad for training in specific fields or for advanced degrees. Universities in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden have a much longer history, and movement trends in these countries vary significantly [9].

### *Section 2. Student mobility through historical discourse and postmodern initiatives.*

Our study gives a practical explanation of the fact that the Nordic agreement on admission to higher education was signed in 1996, before the Bologna Declaration, anticipating European collaborative principles and clarifying the rights of Nordic students to be admitted in the Nordic countries. The agreement introduced the principle that applicants from other Nordic countries should be considered for admission on the same or equivalent basis as local applicants in the Nordic countries [16]. This period is characterized by the creation of the Nordic Institute of Studies in Innovation, Research, and Education (NIFU), the general for all the Scandinavian countries authority unit that has carried out the evaluation of student admission and mobility.

However, in the last 20 years, European cooperation in this area has been increased. But if we look at this period from a historical retrospective view, we cannot but mention the Reykjavik declaration. It was adopted in June 2004 as a Scandinavian response to the Lisbon processes. The declaration was introduced as a Nordic version of the Lisbon convention, to allow for "deeper cooperation concerning mutual recognition" [8, p.2]. The agreement states that "qualification

in the field of higher education of the Nordic countries shall be given full mutual recognition" [8, p.1].

The research states some weak points of agreement in Reykjavik. The above mentioned formulation, nevertheless, does not ensure automatic identification. This agreement, in general, is about the product of education and access to the labor market, rather than admittance to higher education. At the same time, admission and recognition may be viewed as two sides of the same coin - a better integrated tertiary education system [4].

In this part of our study, we are going to identify several important initiatives that have influenced the exchange process significantly in the postmodern educational environment. The overview of the research material gives an opportunity to analyze the Nordplus initiatives as an important tool for Nordic cooperation in students' mobility within the Scandinavian region. According to the surveys, Nordplus has a lot of advantages:

- 1) it seeks a more smooth distribution of students' specialties;
- 2) it emphasizes more balanced mobility;
- 3) it is rather stable over time and the countries that generally receive fewer full degree students are better represented in Nordplus;
- 4) it is viewed as easier and less bureaucratic than many European programs [4].

Nordic Master, started in 2012, is a relatively new initiative in the North European region. The adoption of the credit transfer system, the unique position of similar formal language (English), cultural and philosophical foundation, established knowledge about the educational systems, and even e-learning initiatives, makes it possible to reduce the distance within the Nordic Masters programs and for students to extend or change their educational trajectories in other countries of the region [13].

### *Section 3. Student mobility in the global perspective.*

Our study shows that international, cross-national, trans-cultural and collaborative tendencies of postmodern epoch influence greatly on high education mapping all over the world. In recent decades, both the number of students enrolled in higher education locally and the number of mobile students has increased drastically across the world. According to OECD evaluation, international student mobility has been expanding quite consistently over the past 20 years. In 2019, 6.1 million tertiary students worldwide had crossed a border to study, more than twice the number in 2007. The number of international and foreign tertiary students grew on average by 5.5% per year between 1998 and 2019 with an average annual growth rate of 7% [10; 11].

The most recent OECD data, indicate that there were about 4,5 million mobile students, but situation with COVID-19 brought to a reduction in these numbers. Higher education institutions throughout the world closed in 2020 to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting over 3.9 million international and foreign students studying in OECD nations. The imposed lockdown had an impact on the continuity of learning and the delivery of course content, as well as students' impressions of the worth of their degree and the competence of their host nation to look out for their safety and well-being [11]. These events may have a negative impact on foreign student mobility in the future years.

At the same time, even in such difficult situation with COVID-19, governments seek to encourage the internationalization of higher education. They consider that student

exchange may also be a means of strengthening links between countries, advancing regional identity and mutual understating, maintaining or improving their economic development.

Furthermore, Nordic countries within European Union have revised performance agreements with domestic institutions, for example by taking into account inflows of international students in university funding formulas. In Finland, for instance, the internationalization of higher education is one of the dimensions considered for the funding of tertiary institutions, along with quality and impact measures [15]. Similarly, in Norway, the share of foreign or international students is an indicator used to determine the level of block grant funding allocated to tertiary institutions.

In such a way Nordic and European cooperation illustrates that even in difficult pandemic situation government can stimulate student exchange, as mobility is a significant factor and a driving force for cultural, economic and technological prosperity of every welfare state.

**Conclusions.** The conducted analysis of student mobility in the Scandinavian environment allows us to make the following conclusions:

- 1) This is not a new problem, and it has been actively raised and increased in interest since the Bologna process;
- 2) The Reykjavik Declaration was an adequate response by the Nordic countries to the Bologna and Lisbon initiatives, which stated that increasing the number of mobile degree students was a political goal in these countries;
- 3) Two major projects, "Nordplus" and "Nordic Master," had

a significant impact on the development of student mobility and accessibility in tertiary education in the Nordic environment, implementing collaborative ideas of Scandinavian welfare states' close connection;

- 4) While a standardized degree structure and a general system of qualification recognition in higher education may help to facilitate mobility both within and outside the North European region, they may not be sufficient;
- 5) From the perspective of the governments, student mobility can be judged as a good investment;
- 6) Even in a difficult situation like COVID-19, governments seek to encourage higher education internationalization;
- 7) Global student exchange can be used to strengthen ties between countries, advance regional identity and mutual understanding, and maintain or improve economic development.

This research is not exhaustive. The importance of the discussed problems determines the necessity of their continuous study. We see prospects for further comparative investigation in the number of factors influencing global student mobility, the content design of Bachelors and Masters programs that exist in the European educational environment, and the methods of students' enrollment into these programs. Hopefully, further research will give new and valuable information on the above topic and encourage comparative studies in this field.

**Conflict of interests.** The author states that there is no conflict of interests.

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