

Balanced Mobility Across the Board— A Sensible Objective?

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1 Introduction

The Bologna Process has clearly had a significant contribution to re-shaping the European higher education landscape during the past decade, through the concerted efforts of European countries that joined this reform process to build a common space of education—what became in 2010 the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The main objective of the Bologna Process, that of creating a system of “easily readable and comparable degrees” (i.e. the initially two-cycle, and then the three-cycle system), has been promoted amongst others as a means to facilitate intra-European student mobility and as a tool to increase the “international competitiveness of the European higher education system” (Bologna declaration 1999). The number of international students coming from beyond Europe has been the main proxy used for measuring Europe’s competitiveness compared to that of other higher education spaces. In fact, the ideal to increase student mobility—both internally and from the ‘outside’—has clearly been at the core of the Bologna Process since the very beginning, actually already from the Sorbonne Declaration (1998), i.e. one year before the de facto signature of the Bologna Declaration.

Student mobility has been a constant theme in the ensuing Bologna Process ministerial communiqués—the political declarations of the ministers of education of Bologna Declaration signatory countries, which set the priorities and areas of joint action for countries part of this higher education space for usually 2–3 years. Ministerial communiqués underlined with regularity the need to remove obstacles to student mobility, to facilitate mobility by integrating mobility windows into the curricula of study programmes and by creating joint study programmes, amongst other support measures. Along the same lines, in 2009, in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve,

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the ministers put forward the first concrete mobility-related mobility objective, namely that by 2020 “at least 20 % of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad”.

The “20 % by 2020” mobility benchmark—as this is often called in European higher education jargon—is currently paralleled by another recently-set objective in the area of student mobility, namely the aim of “balanced mobility”. This is what the present article focuses on, i.e. the concept of “balanced mobility” in the EHEA, and more specifically on its coming into existence as a policy goal, its potential understandings, its status quo and on necessary actions to reach it. Consequently, we first try to *trace and understand the goal of having more balanced mobility* between the Bologna Process countries, and to *sketch different ways in which the concept of “balance” could be interpreted*, given that policy references to balanced mobility leave room for interpretation. Next, we *try to provide an answer to the question Why has balanced mobility become an objective at this particular point in time?* Third, we present recent statistics on student mobility in the EHEA context in order to show how balanced or imbalanced mobility flows are. Fourth, we try to outline some possible *solutions for correcting different types of imbalances* encountered in the EHEA context. And last, we try to conclude from the findings of previous sections what would be reasonable to expect in the EHEA context with regards to this policy aim.

2 “Balanced Mobility” in the Bologna Process Context—Some Critical Reflections

2.1 *The Origins*

The call to support more balanced mobility in the European context was first made in (2007), in the London Communiqué, with education ministers of Bologna countries urging higher education “*institutions to take greater responsibility for staff and student mobility, more equitably balanced between countries across the EHEA.*” A careful read of the ministers’ call reveals that when the ministers asked universities to promote more balanced mobility, they had in mind student mobility *within* EHEA, i.e. bilateral student flows between EHEA countries.

The intra-EHEA focus of balanced mobility was kept in the ensuing communiqué of 2009, which specifies that “*Mobility should also lead to a more balanced flow of incoming and outgoing students across the European Higher Education Area*” (Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué 2009). The Leuven Communiqué adds thus an important note: that the aim of balance concerns not only the bilateral student flows between EHEA countries, but also the relation (or ratio) between total inflows and outflows of individual countries. Last but not least,

at the same ministerial conference, the education leaders also tasked the Bologna Process Follow-Up Group (BFUG)—the operational arm of this reform process—to look into “*how balanced mobility could be achieved within the EHEA*”.

The response to the ministers’ question came in (2012), in the Bucharest Communiqué, which stipulates that EHEA countries should “*strive for open higher education systems and better balanced mobility in the EHEA. If mobility imbalances between EHEA countries are deemed unsustainable by at least one party, we encourage the countries involved to jointly seek a solution, in line with the EHEA Mobility Strategy.*” Therefore, the Bucharest policy document maintains the focus on balance *within* EHEA, but adds an important detail for understanding the rationale behind this goal, namely that a good solution for correcting imbalances could be bilateral talks between EHEA countries experiencing these situations.

The EHEA Mobility Strategy—*Mobility for better learning* (2012)—adopted by the ministers of education at the same high-level conference in 2012, adds some essential elements for the discussion and understanding of this policy goal. First, the strategy extends the scope of balanced mobility to flows between EHEA and non-EHEA countries, i.e. clarifies that balanced mobility is not only an internal objective, but also an external goal. Second, the ministers clarify that when they advocate balanced mobility they primarily mean to achieve more balance in *degree mobility*, rather than in credit mobility (which is by nature more balanced). Third, the strategy specifies that imbalances with regards to (too) high international student inflows were to be particularly tackled: “*Efforts made by governments as well as higher education institutions confronted with high levels of incoming degree and credit mobility deserve our acknowledgement and attention in order to strengthen the EHEA.*” And fourth, it lists some actions on how imbalances could be addressed, advancing the possibility of multilateral—instead of bilateral only—action, as a last resort: “*If the findings show greater imbalances over longer periods of time, the governments concerned should jointly investigate the causes, consider carefully the advantages and disadvantages of the specific imbalance and seek solutions if deemed necessary. Dealing with the matter multilaterally might also be considered.*”

Therefore to summarize, the Bologna Process policy documents (to date) allow us to conclude the following with regards to the balanced mobility aim. First, that balance is an internal (between EHEA countries), but as of 2012 also an external (between EHEA and non-EHEA countries), objective. Second, that balance is primarily to be sought in bilateral flows between EHEA countries (e.g. between the number of students from country X going to study in country Y and the number of students from country Y coming to study in country X). Third, that nevertheless, at country level, balance is pursued also between total inflows and outflows (e.g. between the total number of students going out of and coming into an EHEA country). And fourth, that particularly imbalances due to high inflows of degree-seeking students should be addressed.

2.2 *The Caveats*

Interestingly, the objective of balanced mobility was set in the EHEA context without any prior explanation of what is actually understood through balanced mobility. Or to express this differently, under which conditions mobility flows would be considered as balanced. Would only situations of perfect equilibrium between inflows and outflows be regarded as balanced or would small differences also be acceptable? These issues were not explored in the Bologna Process policy documents, balanced mobility lacking a proper definition therein. There are different potential explanations as to why this happened (or has not happened)—for example the ministers might have thought that the concept of balance was self-explanatory, or they believed that clarifying the concept would not be a task for themselves, but of the operational arm of the process—the BFUG.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the motives behind this lack of clarity, there have been earlier attempts to define what “balanced mobility” could mean. Applying this concept of balance to total student inflows and outflows, Teichler et al. proposed in 2011 to define as balanced a situation where the difference between inflows and outflows is smaller than 10 percentage points. Therefore, balanced would be not only cases where there is full equilibrium between the number of incoming and outgoing students (which is almost impossible to achieve in practice), but also cases where the differences are considered negligible or non-detrimental. This is the definition that we will be working with in the following sections in order to analyse how balanced or imbalanced EHEA mobility flows are.

Apart from the lack of a proper definition, another peculiarity of this objective in the Bologna Process context is that, while the concept of balanced mobility is pursued here primarily in degree mobility, the idea of reciprocity, of balance, is actually the cornerstone of another type of mobility, i.e. credit mobility (student exchanges). Therefore, balance in degree mobility is a borrowed concept. Reciprocity as such was one of the original aims of the ERASMUS Programme, in the sense that the programme wanted to break away from up to then traditional mobility patterns (i.e. East to West and South to North) and to foster also reverse flows (West to East and North to South). Therefore, even in the context of credit mobility balance was not meant as full reciprocity, but rather as having flows in both directions.

Knowing that the concept of balance is specific to credit mobility, we cannot help but wonder if it is at all applicable to or pursuable for degree mobility. Or to express this doubt differently—would governments have the same tools at their disposal to influence balance in degree mobility as they have in credit mobility? The short answer to this question is no, they do not.

Earlier studies (Kelo et al. 2006; Teichler et al. 2011) have highlighted the intrinsic differences between credit and degree mobility, labelling the first as a horizontal and the second as a vertical type of mobility. Credit mobility is horizontal in the sense that students move for study purposes between higher education systems that are more or less on an equal par. The main aim of credit mobility is

personal development and having the experience of another type of teaching and learning (to compare with one's own). In contrast, degree mobility is seen as vertical, in the sense that students generally move from one least developed to a more advanced higher education system, in the hope of getting a better education—a better degree—or a specialisation that is not available in the home country.

As the main drivers of the two types of mobility are different, so are their main funding sources. Whereas credit mobility is largely funded via different mobility programmes (either at the European, national or institutional level), degree mobility predominantly happens outside official funding schemes (i.e. is self-funded)—estimates are that at least 90 % of degree mobile students are free movers (Teichler et al. 2011). As a result, while governments can more easily shape the credit mobility flows and move towards more balanced exchanges by adjusting the funding they make available for these purposes, they do not have the same room for manoeuvre in degree mobility, which is preponderantly self-funded and driven by individual (career) needs. We will come back to these points in Sect. 4, when we try to outline potential courses of actions that are necessary to correct imbalances.

3 Why “Balanced Mobility” in 2007?

As presented in the earlier section, balanced mobility was first mentioned as a policy goal in the Bologna Process context in 2007. So what has happened in this period to explain the adoption of this objective at the supranational level, especially knowing that imbalances in student flows were not a new development for most European countries? Just as an example, many countries in Eastern and Southern Europe had for instance for more than a decade not only experienced, but also denounced a particular type of imbalance—“brain drain”, i.e. the fact that much more of their students left to study abroad than students came from abroad into their higher education systems. This outflow of students to other countries coupled with often modest inflows was equalled to an export of talent, a situation no particular country wanted to find itself into.

Furthermore, in a recent study of Eurydice (2012), comparing the size of and differences between the numbers of incoming and outgoing degree-seeking students in the EHEA countries, the latter are divided into four types of systems, depending on the kind and magnitude of imbalances they experience. Accordingly, the “limited” systems are found in countries experiencing high outflows but lower inflows (those generally denouncing brain drain), the “closed” countries are those with low outflows and even lower inflows, while the “open” systems are characterised by high outflows but even higher inflows), and finally the “attractive”, with low outflows and generally high inflows.

What the Eurydice study also does is clearly show that, while balanced mobility might seem like a hard-to-challenge objective—as the very notion of balance has an intrinsic positive value (balance is generally perceived as essentially good, while imbalance as negative)—there are situations where certain types of imbalances are

not only seen as positive, but also highly desirable. Just as there are situations in which balanced mobility is not necessarily positively connoted. And as the authors showed through their grouping of systems, for a long time in the European context high student inflows and smaller outflows have been actively pursued as an objective, whereas situations of low inflows and low outflows for example, while balanced, have been largely seen as undesirable. While countries with “attractive systems” (like the UK, France, Denmark, Sweden, Belgium) were seen (despite their great imbalances) as “the benchmark” in terms of student mobility, countries with “limited systems”, although showing more balanced flows, were clearly not a model.

Therefore imbalances were not a new phenomenon in 2007 and certain imbalances in student inflows have not only been tolerated, but actively pursued. So coming back to our question, why balanced mobility in the Bologna Process in 2007? Because, particularly in the mid-2000s, some of the countries with “attractive” systems and which enjoyed greater power of influence in the Bologna Process became to an extent victims of their own success. Several of them started to feel some negative consequences of too high inflows of foreign students, either in the form of (hindered) access of their own nationals to higher education in specific fields (e.g. Austria and the French-speaking Community of Belgium) or related to the cost of education, i.e. questioning the legitimacy of educating foreigners by using national tax-payers’ money in countries with no or not very high tuition fees (e.g. Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany more recently).

Two elements speak in favour of this interpretation in particular:

- the focus in the EHEA context on balance in *degree mobility*, although balance is a concept specific to credit mobility, as commented above, and although imbalances were equally observed in credit mobility (Teichler et al. 2011, p. 92, Vol. I); and
- the focus on imbalances related to *incoming* degree mobility, alluding to countries “confronted with” a high influx of students from abroad, although imbalances related to outgoing mobility (“brain drain”) had a much longer history in the Bologna context.

The first type of negative consequence—limited access for own nationals—has been experienced by 2 countries in particular. Austria and the French-speaking Community of Belgium had been trying to cope for over a decade with a high influx of foreigners from neighbouring countries Germany and respectively France (with whom they shared the same language) in a specific subject area—medical and paramedical studies—regulated by a *numerus clausus* condition. As the German and the French applicants crossing the border and applying in the neighbouring countries became more numerous, they increasingly prevented the access of Austrian and Walloon students to this subject area. In 2005 for example, 40 % of the new entrants in medical studies in Austria were German nationals. To cope with this situation, the two EU member states decided in 2006 to introduce student quotas in this subject field, i.e. to reserve a number of places for domestic students and to thus limit the access of foreign (also EU) nationals (Pechar 2014). As of

2006, 75 % of study places in medicine in Austria and 70 % in Wallonia are reserved for own nationals.

This move has gotten both Austria and the French-speaking Community of Belgium in a dispute with two European Union institutions—the European Commission (EC) and the European Court of Justice (ECJ), for breaching a fundamental right in the EU context—the right to free movement (Garben 2012). After long deliberations, the EC (in 2007) and the ECJ in a preliminary ruling (in 2010) have concluded that, while imposing quotas for other EU-nationals violates the right to free movement in the EU framework, such practices could be accepted in very specific situations. The countries in question had to demonstrate that their national systems would be, without imposing such measures, at risk. Therefore, Austria and the French-speaking Community of Belgium were given a moratorium until 2016, by which time they have to demonstrate that the foreign medical students graduating in their countries leave after graduation, and that as a result the Austrian and the Walloon healthcare systems will inevitably be confronted with an undersupply of medical staff.

The second type of negative consequence felt by “attractive” countries had to do with the cost of educating large cohorts of foreigners and its legitimacy. One of the countries in this situation was Denmark. For years Denmark had been a net receiver of degree-seeking students from the other Nordic countries, or, otherwise said, the other Nordic countries were having big groups of their own nationals educated in Denmark (at the latter’s expense). To cover for this extra cost for Danish universities, a compensation system was put in place already in 1996 in the framework of the Nordic Council of Ministers, under which Denmark would be entitled to a lump sum for each student it enrolled from another Nordic country (Wächter 2013). The compensation system was managed through the budget of the Nordic Council of Ministers, Denmark not having to receive directly any payments.

It must be said though that this type of compensation mechanism, also found for example in Switzerland between the Swiss cantons, is not designed to redress the imbalances as such, i.e. is not meant to reduce the gap between inflows and outflows, but rather to remedy the financial consequences of imbalances and the burden off the country primarily affected by the imbalances. In other words, the compensation mechanism is a model of cost-sharing between the countries involved, but does not automatically lead to more balanced mobility.

National debates about the cost of educating foreigners have taken place in recent years also in countries like Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany, but have so far concluded with the finding that if only a small share of foreign graduates remain and work in their host country upon graduation then the economic returns significantly outweigh the initial investment in education. Given the strong link between degree mobility and migration, critical discussions have also taken place in France and the UK, as to the impact and rights of foreign graduates, but the two countries have not yet taken any measures to limit the number of international students.

4 How Balanced Are EHEA Mobility Flows?

Although we have seen that balanced mobility was very likely advanced as a policy goal in the Bologna Process by a group of influential countries (part of the “attractive” systems group and that experienced a specific type of imbalance), it is worthwhile to have a look at mobility statistics for the whole group of EHEA countries, to see how balanced or imbalanced student mobility flows currently are.

Concretely, we will look at the relation (ratio) between

- total inflows and outflows per EHEA country;
- inflows from and outflows to other EHEA countries (intra-EHEA balance); and
- inflows from and outflows to non-EHEA countries.

The analysis is based on data on international degree mobility for the year 2010/11, the most recent year available at the time of writing this article in the international data collection of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). Given the major effort to collect mobility data from the national level worldwide, inevitably this dataset presents figures less recent than those available in individual countries, but more comparable (thanks to common definitions used for data collection). We focus on degree mobility only, given the emphasis on degree mobility whenever balance is discussed in the Bologna Process context, but also because of the lack of an EHEA-wide data collection on credit mobility (which makes such an analysis for credit mobility impossible).¹

4.1 *Balance Between Total Inflows and Outflows per Country*

Figure 1 presents for each EHEA country and for this higher education space as a whole the total number of incoming students divided by the total number of outgoing students, i.e. the IN:OUT ratio. Ratios with a value of 1.0, as well as with a difference of less than 0.10 (equivalent of 10 percentage points) are seen as balanced. Ratios with values higher than 1.1 are imbalanced towards inflows, while ratios with values smaller than 0.9 show imbalances towards outflows.

It is quite clear from the figure that only two (highlighted in green) of the 47 EHEA countries actually have balanced mobility flows—Norway and Greece. As

¹Hypothetically, we could also imagine applying the concept of balance to bilateral flows between countries. But given the stark differences between the size of the higher education systems that are part of EHEA country and given the tradition of certain countries to specialize in certain disciplines that are offered to foreigners (e.g. medical and paramedical studies in Hungary, Romania, etc.) we find it hard to believe that this is what the ministers had in mind when adopting the balance objective. Further on, we could also envisage applying the concept of balance across study fields, and levels of study (Bachelor, Master and Ph.D.). However, given the lack of comparable data at supranational level on these parameters, we could not conduct any such analyses.

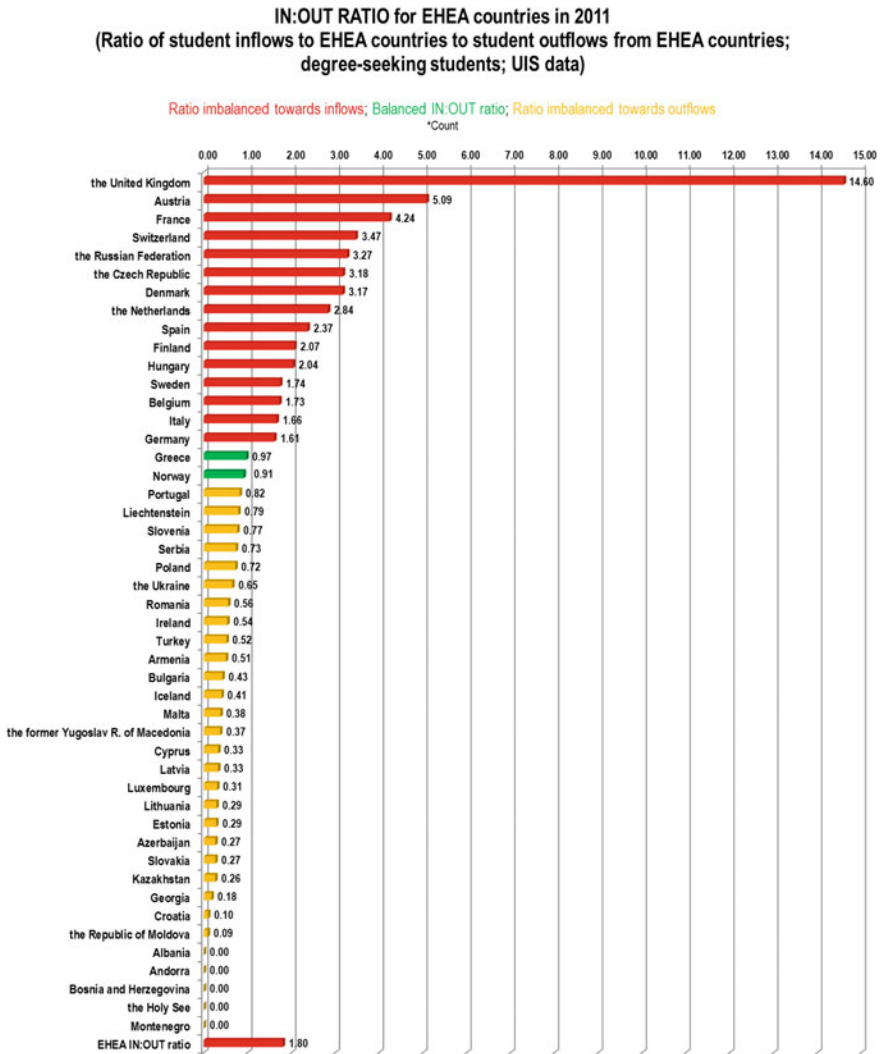


Fig. 1 IN:OUT ratios for EHEA countries in 2010/11. *Albania, Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Holy See and Montenegro had no data available for inflows, hence the 0 values in the figure for the ratios

earlier commented though, the table also shows that the vast majority of EHEA countries (25 in total) are net exporters of students, while EHEA as a whole is imbalanced towards inflows, receiving almost twice more students than it sends abroad. This is because some of the main receiver countries of foreign students amongst EHEA members are also imbalanced towards incoming (15 countries, the UK—Germany group in the figure).

The size of imbalances also largely varies between EHEA countries—while for countries like Germany, Portugal or Liechtenstein the imbalances are not so significant, for the UK for instance, the number of incoming students is almost 15 times higher than the number of outgoing students.

4.2 Balance Within EHEA

Figure 2 presents for each EHEA country the number of students coming from other EHEA countries divided by the number of own students going abroad to other

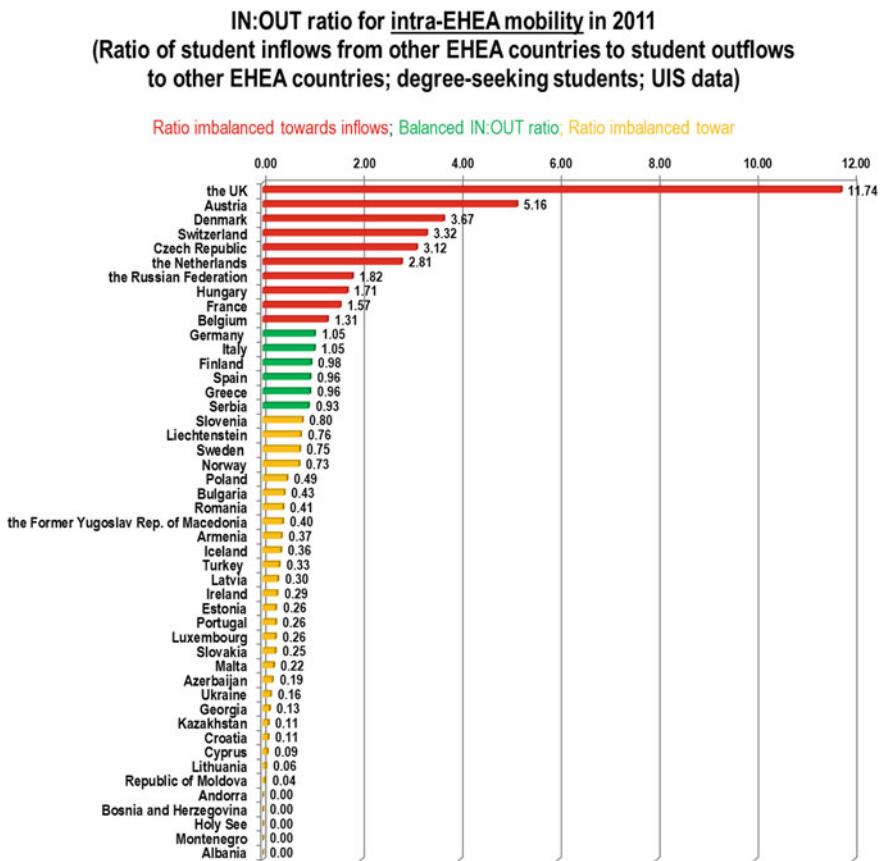


Fig. 2 IN:OUT ratios for intra-EHEA mobility in 2010/11. *Albania, Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Holy See and Montenegro had no data available for inflows, hence the 0 values in the figure for the ratios

EHEA countries only (the IN:OUT intra-EHEA ratios), given that balanced mobility was first put forward, as seen above, as an objective for mobility within the EHEA block. Figure 2 shows however that comparatively speaking mobility flows between the EHEA countries only are more balanced than in the case of total mobility (i.e. if other countries of origin and destination are taken into account as well). Six countries (Fig. 2) compared to only two previously (Fig. 1) have balanced flows, receiving from other EHEA countries about as many degree-seeking students as they send to the same country grouping. Furthermore, only 10 countries compared to 15 countries previously (Fig. 1) are net importers of degree-seeking students from other EHEA countries. In several cases, the size of imbalances has also significantly decreased, e.g. for the UK from 14.6 to 11.74, for Germany from 1.61 to 1.05, etc.

4.3 Balance with Non-EHEA Countries

Figure 3 presents for each EHEA country the number of students coming from non-EHEA countries divided by the number of own students studying abroad in non-EHEA countries, because, as mentioned above, the EHEA Mobility Strategy refers, although much more briefly, to the need to have balanced mobility also with non-EHEA countries, i.e. countries that are not part of this educational block. In this respect, data presented in Fig. 3 is particularly revealing. The biggest imbalances that EHEA countries face are not in the student flows to and from other EHEA countries (i.e. in internal mobility), but with countries outside this educational space. Whereas overall the majority of EHEA countries are exporters of degree-seeking students (Fig. 1), when it comes to the flows between EHEA and non-EHEA countries, the majority of countries—32—are net importers of students. This leads us to conclude that in fact the biggest imbalances that EHEA countries would have to address are not with other EHEA countries, but with non-EHEA ones. And if EHEA countries continue to outline balanced mobility as a policy goal, then they should first and foremost be ready to correct their imbalances with non-EHEA countries.

5 More Balanced Flows—What Would This Entail?

Given the balanced mobility policy goal and the magnitude of imbalances presented in the previous section, an inevitable question is what kind of actions could and should be taken to reduce the gap between inflows and outflows? And related, would EHEA countries be likely to take such actions?

As mentioned above, while the Bologna communiqués mention bilateral and multilateral talks as a means to solve the imbalances, the solutions tried so far—compensation mechanisms—are not so much a tool to correct the imbalances as

IN:OUT ratio to and from non-EHEA countries in 2011
(Ratio of student inflows from non-EHEA countries to student outflows to non-EHEA countries; degree-seeking students; UIS data)

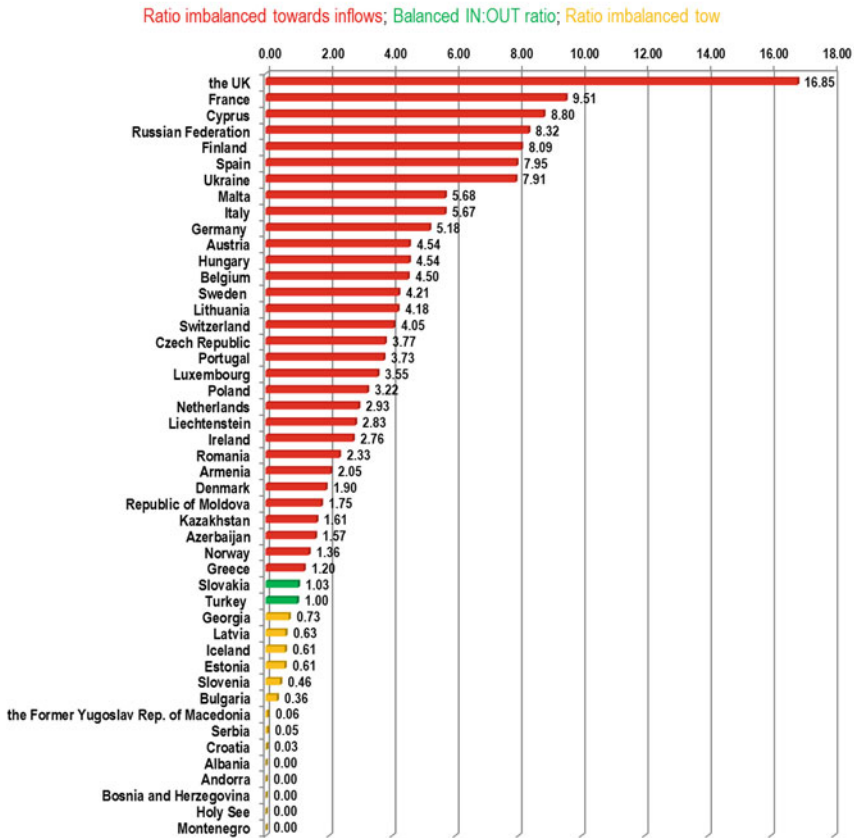


Fig. 3 IN:OUT ratios to and from non-EHEA countries in 2010/11. *Albania, Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Holy See and Montenegro had no data available for inflows, hence the 0 values in the figure for the ratios

such, as they are a means to address the financial implications of imbalances. Therefore, limiting the imbalances would require other types of means.

For countries with imbalances towards inflows (i.e. higher inflows than outflows), a logical step would be to try to increase the outflows and/or to limit the inflows. While this seems possible in theory, in practice it is rather unlikely that countries would be willing to take such actions. Previous research has shown that supporting higher student outflows in degree mobility is very rarely a policy goal, given that high outflows are generally associated with brain drain—a situation that no country wants to willingly experience (Ferencz and Wächter 2012). The only circumstances

so far in which countries supported outgoing degree mobility were if they had limited internal capacity in higher education, and it proved cheaper to train their students abroad than to develop this capacity internally—notable such examples are Cyprus and Norway. But once countries develop such capacities at home, they are in general no longer willing to encourage outflows. Limiting the inflows seems also hard to imagine outside of very specific situations like those in Austria and the French-speaking community of Belgium, where high number of incoming students hinder the access to higher education of domestic students, if not for other reasons than at least because it would be a violation of EU's principle of free movement (for EHEA countries that are also EU member states). Also, as many European countries start to experience a decline in their university-age population, students from abroad become an indispensable resource to ensure the survival of many institutions. Not to mention that in more and more European countries the non-European students in particular are a very important source of revenue generation.

From countries experiencing imbalances towards outflows, i.e. higher outflows than inflows, the opposite would be expected, namely taking measures to decrease the outflows and/or increase the inflows. Again, we are sceptical that this would be possible via other measures than be restricting the right to free movement in the EU context, given that generally countries do not massively fund outgoing degree mobility (so their influence is limited) and that what drives degree mobility is individual will to get a better education elsewhere. So unless countries impose restrictions on the right to leave the country for study purposes or they substantially improve the quality of their higher education system to determine their students to want to remain “at home” (which is anyhow a long-term process), it's hard to imagine that governments alone can lower outflows. Higher inflows on the other hand are what most countries strive for, but something which is harder to achieve and which is a long-term process.

And let us not forget that most EHEA countries that have committed themselves to the goal of balanced mobility do not experience marginal imbalances, but significant ones—their discrepancies between inflows and outflows in one direction or the other being between 100 and 1600 %. Therefore, large-scale actions would be necessary to remedy the imbalances.

6 Conclusions: Balanced Mobility—A Reasonable Objective?

In the previous sections we have tried to dissect the objective of balanced mobility as articulated in the Bologna Process context. Specifically, we have:

- traced and tried to understand the goal of having more balanced mobility between the Bologna Process countries,
- looked into what exactly might explain the adoption of balanced mobility as a policy goal,

- presented statistics on current imbalances that would have to be addressed, and
- tried to identify necessary courses of action for correcting current imbalances.

In order to answer the question behind this article, namely of whether balanced mobility is a sensible policy goal, we would like to reiterate some of the main points we've made throughout the article.

First, the aim of having more balanced mobility was pushed through in the Bologna Process at a time when a group of “attractive” and influential EHEA countries (from a higher education point of view) were affected by very specific types of imbalance related to international student inflows, i.e. very high inflows of foreign students in specific fields of study or the rising costs of educating foreign students as a result of ever growing numbers. So when balance was adopted as a Bologna objective, the countries in question had a specific agenda in mind—the remedy of this particular type of imbalances (too high or costly inflows), although most other EHEA countries were experiencing another type of imbalance, namely too high outflows.

Second, balanced mobility was set first and foremost as an internal objective, although, as shown above, mobility flows between EHEA countries are much more balanced than flows between EHEA and non-EHEA countries. With the extension of the balance aim to non-EHEA countries, if EHEA countries want to achieve the balance objective, then it seems normal that they would first focus on the biggest imbalances, i.e. those with non-EHEA countries.

Third, in the EHEA, balance is sought primarily in degree mobility although it is a concept originating from credit mobility and though degree mobility is the type of mobility that is least under the control and influence of governments.

Fourth, although balance is a set objective, in degree mobility some imbalances have for a long time been regarded as not only positive but also desirable. We find it hard to believe that the general attitude towards this will change. Most countries aspire to become “attractive” systems (although these are highly imbalanced towards inflows) and to move away from being “closed” or “limited” systems (although these have on average much more balanced flows).

And fifth, given the types of imbalances encountered in EHEA countries, concerted action would be needed from EHEA countries, namely measures to either limit inflows and/or increase outflows or to increase inflows and/or lower outflows. As argued above, we find it hard to believe that most countries would be willing or even able (have the necessary resources) to take such measures.

From all these we conclude that balance across the board is not an achievable, nor a desirable objective. While measures to correct particularly detrimental imbalances in bilateral flows seem necessary and advisable, it is hard to make the case for balance as such.

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