International Review of Education (2008) 54:135–154
DOI 10.1007/s11159-007-9081-9

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF ERASMUS STUDENTS: A TREND TOWARDS WIDER INCLUSION?

MANUEL SOUTO OTERO

Abstract – The article focuses on the financial issues and family background of Erasmus students. It examines the costs of Erasmus study periods in the academic year 2004/05 and the socio-economic background of Erasmus students that year, based on over 15000 survey responses. Results are compared with those of a similar survey undertaken in 1998 to track changes over the last decade. The main question that the article addresses is whether international mobility of higher education students within the Erasmus programme has been expanded to more students from lower socio-economic backgrounds during this period. We find that, in spite of still important socio-economic barriers to the take-up of the programme, access has been moderately widened.

Résumé – LE MILIEU SOCIO-ÉCONOMIQUE DES ÉTUDIANTS: UNE TENDANCE VERS UNE INCLUSION PLUS LARGE? – l'article se concentre sur les questions financières et l'arrière-plan familial des étudiants Erasmus. Il examine le coût des périodes d'étude avec Erasmus pour l'année universitaire 2004/05 ainsi que le milieu socio-économique des étudiants Erasmus de cette même année, se basant sur une enquête ayant obtenue plus de 15000 réponses. Les résultats sont comparés à ceux d'une enquête semblable entreprise en 1998 pour dépister les changements intervenus pendant la dernière décennie. La question principale que l'article aborde est si, au sein du programme Erasmus, la mobilité internationale des étudiants dans l'éducation supérieure a augmenté pendant cette période afin d'inclure plus d'étudiants de milieux socio-économiques inférieurs. Nous constatons que, malgré des barrières socio-économiques toujours importantes, l'accès y a été modérément élargi.

Zusammenfassung – ZUM SOZIOÖKONOMISCHEN HINTERGRUND ERASMUS-STUDIERENDER: GEHT DER TREND ZUR ERWEITERTEN AUFNAHME? – Der Artikel befasst sich mit der finanziellen Situation und dem familiären Hintergrund von Erasmus-Studierenden. Auf der Basis von über 15000 ausgefüllten Fragebogen werden die Kosten der Erasmus-Studienperioden im akademischen Jahr 2004/05 sowie der sozioökonomische Hintergrund der Erasmus-Studierenden dieses Jahrgangs untersucht. Die Ergebnisse werden mit denen einer ähnlichen Umfrage aus dem Jahre 1998 verglichen, um so Veränderungen im Lauf der letzten zehn Jahre sichtbar zu machen. Der Schwerpunkt des Artikels liegt auf der Fragestellung, ob sich die internationale Mobilität von Hochschulstudierenden im Erasmus-Programm so gesteigert hat, dass auch Studierende mit niedrigerem sozioökonomischen Hintergrund während dieser Periode ins Programm aufgenommen werden konnten. Unserer Meinung nach hat sich der Zugang zum Programm leicht verbessert, obwohl es immer noch bedeutende sozioökonomische Barrieren gibt.

Resumen – ¿UNA INCLUSIÓN MÁS AMPLIA? EL PERFIL SOCIO-ECONÓMICO DE LOS ESTUDIANTES 'ERASMUS' – Este artículo se centra en la situación económica y en el perfil familiar de estudiantes con beca Erasmus. Analiza los costos de

los períodos de estudios Erasmus del año académico 2004/05 y el perfil socio-económico de estudiantes Erasmus durante ese año, basado en más de 15.000 respuestas a una encuesta de dichos estudiantes. Estos resultados se comparan con los de una encuesta similar realizada en 1998, con el fin de detectar los cambios producidos durante la última década. La pregunta principal que plantea este artículo es si el programa Erasmus ha ampliado la oportunidad de movilidad internacional de los estudiantes de enseñanza superior con niveles socio-económicos más bajos durante ese período. Constatamos que, pese a que sigan existiendo barreras socio-económicas importantes, el acceso se ha ampliado moderadamente.

Резюме – СОЦИАЛЬНО-ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКИЙ СТАТУС СТУДЕНТОВ ПРОГРАММЫ «ЭРАСМУС»: ТЕНДЕНЦИЯ К ОХВАТУ БОЛЬШЕГО ЧИСЛА УЧАСТНИКОВ? – В данной статье акцент ставится на финансовых вопросах и семейном статусе студентов программы «Эрасмус». В статье рассматривается стоимость этапов обучения по программе «Эрасмус» в 2004/05 учебном году и социально-экономический статус студентов данной программы того же года на основе проведенного опроса более 15000 участников. Результаты сравниваются с данными аналогичного опроса, проведенного в 1998 году с целью выявления изменений на протяжении последнего десятилетия. Основным вопросом, который рассматривается в данной статье, является – увеличилась ли на протяжении этого периода времени международная мобильность студентов в сфере высшего образования внутри программы «Эрасмус» с целью охвата большего количества студентов, имеющих более низкий социально-экономический статус. Обнаруживается, что, несмотря на все еще существенные социально-экономические барьеры, доступ был умеренно расширен.

Questions and hypotheses[1]

This article makes use of data collected during 2006 in a 30-country survey about the socio-economic background of Erasmus students. The survey targeted students who participated in the programme during the academic year 2004/2005 and provided new data on Erasmus students' programme of study, language proficiency, social and cultural experiences, financial issues, accommodation and family background. This survey updated a similar survey carried out by the European Commission in 1998 (European Commission 2000) which targeted around 20,000 students from 300 institutions in 15 countries, and registered 9,500 responses.

The article focuses on the main financial issues faced by Erasmus students in their period of study abroad and their family background. The article addresses three main questions. The first relates to the motivation of students to undertake Erasmus periods. The second refers to cross-country inequalities in the profile of students accessing the programme. The third refers to the evolution in the profile of students accessing the programme across time. We hypothesise, in relation to the first question,

that the importance of the ''Erasmus experience'' is a great motivator for young people to undertake an Erasmus period abroad. This is expected since the number of Erasmus students has been increasing strongly since the set up of the programme, whereas returns to participation in the programme in labour market terms seem to be diminishing. In relation to cross-country inequalities, we hypothesise that students from the less rich countries participating in the programme will exhibit a higher socio-economic background – on average – than students from richer countries since we expect that they face higher additional expenses during their Erasmus periods. Finally, in relation to the profile of students over time, we hypothesise that the profile of Erasmus students would have been little altered over the last decade, given the only small increase in grant levels over this period.

We find that the first hypothesis is confirmed, whereas hypotheses two and three are not confirmed. The ''international experience'' of a period of study abroad is indeed highly appreciated by students – as already advanced by some previous studies, and this period greatly changes the views of students over an important number of issues. In relation to the second point, there are complex trends at play: it is in the richer counties that students from families in the highest national income levels participate in the programme more frequently. By contrast, it is in the poorer countries that we see less people from higher socio-economic backgrounds participating in the programme. This may highlight two different motivations for mobility: the predominance of mobility for ''consumption'' from higher socio-economic groups in higher income countries versus mobility for ''investment'' from less well off people from lower income countries, the other countries falling somewhere in between these two extremes. Data reveals, moreover, that individuals from certain middle to low-income countries are those who suffer the greatest ''net-cost'' of the Erasmus period. The relationship between country income and additional expense is however, and somewhat surprisingly, not too clear or pronounced. This apparently counter-intuitive finding is largely explained by the fact that students from lower income countries adopt strategies to reduce their expenses in their host country. The eight countries at the bottom in student́s average monthly expenses in the host country are low-income countries. Finally, in relation to the third hypothesis we find that in spite of the still existing important socio-economic barriers to the take-up of the programme access has been moderately widened over the last decade.

The article is structured as follows. Section two introduces the Erasmus programme and outlines the main strands of previous research on it. Section three presents the main characteristics of the data used in the article. Section four presents results from the 2006 survey and section four analyses trends in the socio-economic background of students over the last decade. Section five provides our conclusions.

Erasmus student mobility, associated benefits and the distribution of opportunities

The history and scale of international student migration is well documented. According to UNESCO statistics (UNESCO 1997, 1999), about half a million students studied abroad in the early 1970s, about a million in the early 1980s, and about 1.5 million in the mid-1990s. This expansion is impressive, although the "mobility student quota" has remained constant, at around 2% (UNESCO 1999). The majority of international students come from 'developing' countries, and most of them go to – according to UNESCO terminology – 'developed' countries (Teichler 1999; UNESCO 1997).

Since 1987, however, the Erasmus programme has provided a strong impulse to mobility within Europe. Thus, during the last two decades, more than a million and a half students have taken the opportunity to study abroad using the programme. This has contributed to changing the views of students about studying in another European country: this is no longer viewed as exceptional in the participating countries (Teichler 2004). In the year 2004/2005 alone 144,058 students undertook Erasmus mobility periods in 31 countries, with an average duration of 6 months per period. Of these students, 137,166 received an Erasmus grant, whereas 6,892 participated in the programme without a grant (European Commission 2006). The average grant per month per student during our year of reference was €140, although there were high variations between the average grant per country (this was €498 in Cyprus and €92 in the Czech Republic).

Throughout its existence, the Erasmus programme has been highly visible and the subject of a relatively high number of analyses. The first studies about the programme at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s aimed to provide a more detailed and accurate picture of the Erasmuś student cohorts. The functioning and impact of student mobility in the context of Erasmus were covered by Baron and Smith (1987), Opper et al. (1990) and Teichler and Steube (1991). The impact of the programme on national education policies has also been analysed in several studies (e.g. Barblan et al. 2000; Enders 2004; Huisman 2004; Kälvermark and Wende 1997; Wende 2001, 2002). Comparative studies gave a comprehensive picture of the study programmes followed by Erasmus students and their experiences abroad, their living conditions in the host countries, their motivation for studying abroad, and their assessment of the academic progress undergone during the periods (see e.g. Burn et al. 1990; Maiworm and Teichler 2002; Maiworm et al. 1991, 1993; Rosselle and Lentiez 1999; Teichler 1991, 1996, 2004; Teichler and Maiworm 1997).

Part of this research suggests that students can expect certain returns from their participation in the programme, in terms of job prospects and personal development, although these have been diminishing (Teichler 2004; University of Kassel, unpublished). This makes the question of distribution of opportunities for participation in the programme between different groups

relevant. Little, however, has been researched about the profile of students who take part in Erasmus. In this respect, a key issue is the socio-economic background of students – and its interplay with national characteristics. The background of these students could be expected to reflect the socio-economic background of higher education students in general, which is different to the socio-economic background of the whole population (see, for instance, Muller and Karle 1993 for an analysis of European countries; Woessmann 2004).

In 1998/1999 the European Commission launched a survey on the socio-economic background of Erasmus students, which suggested that there are differences in the socio-economic profile of Erasmus students in relation to the general population and also to higher education students. A recent survey of Swiss university graduates (classes of 1999 and 2001) seemed to confirm this finding and reported that participation in student exchange programmes depends significantly on the socio-economic background of students (Messer and Wolter 2005). The results of the survey reported in this article complement these studies and provide a more up-to-date picture of the background of students, based on a larger number of observations and covering a larger number of countries than any of the previous studies. It will also enable us to compare progress over time in the widening of the profile of students participating in the programme.

Data

The data used for this article was gathered through an online survey that targeted all participant universities in Erasmus (over 2,500). These were requested to distribute the survey amongst their 2004/2005 Erasmus students. Overall 15,513 valid responses from 30 countries were received, the largest number of responses for a survey of Erasmus students to date. These provided a representative sample with a margin of error of 0.74% at a confidence level of 95%. Analyses at country level for 22 countries would exhibit a margin of error lower than 6% (Belgium, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Austria, Portugal, Finland, Ireland, Sweden, Netherlands, UK, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia and Turkey). Analyses for four countries (Denmark, Greece, Iceland and Norway) would exhibit a margin of error lower than 11% at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for Liechtenstein, Estonia, Malta and Cyprus were above this level, whereas no responses were obtained for Luxembourg. For reasons of space limited use is made of country-level data in this article, where we focus on European-wide trends.

Two caveats are worth highlighting at this stage. First, the survey relied on students' self-reporting. This may generate some problems in the reliability of the data obtained, in particular for specific items. Indeed, data on the financial situation of students could be expected to be less reliable than data for

other survey questions. For instance, it is easier for students to judge in broad terms the socio-economic situation of their parents or their overall impression of their Erasmus period – some of the topics covered in the survey – than their average monthly income or their expenditure on books or food during their year abroad. Although as much care as possible was taken to clean our database in order to remove any obvious anomalies in the responses received (e.g. removing outliners), the results reported in this article need to be treated with some caution.

Second, section five of this article also makes use of the Commission's survey of the socio-economic background of Erasmus students 1997/1998 (European Commission 2000) as well as the EUROSTUDENT survey (HIS 2005), one of the few sources on the socio-economic and family background of students available internationally – providing data for 11 countries. Comparable empirical surveys that cover a large number of countries are notoriously complex undertakings, even when data is collected uniformly, as it was the case in the three surveys used for this article. They all used a standard questionnaire translated into the national languages of the countries covered by the surveys and benefited from meetings between individuals from different nationalities in the drawing of survey questions. Moreover, the two Erasmus students surveys shared a relatively high number of questions to improve comparisons between their results.

Nevertheless, important differences remain between the surveys, that complicate comparisons between them. Whereas the first Erasmus survey was a postal survey, the second Erasmus survey was distributed online. The HIS survey combined postal questionnaires, online questionnaires and face-to-face interviews, depending on the country covered. The samples reached by these different surveys, therefore, may have been subject to different biases – e.g. it could be expected that some bias towards higher socio-economic groups is introduced by the use of online surveys compared to postal surveys. Second, the sample sizes for the surveys varied. The first Erasmus survey registered around 6,000 replies less than the second Erasmus survey although it covered a smaller number of countries and had a higher response rate – reducing possible non-response biases. HIS is a different case since it did not target Erasmus students, but HE students in general. Whereas the first Erasmus survey report (European Commission 2000) does not provide information about its sampling strategy, the HIS survey combined several types of sampling (stratified random sampling and quota sampling being the most common). The second Erasmus survey was a census survey, approaching the whole of participating institutions (and through them, students) in Erasmus in its target year. Finally, the surveys covered, as we have said, a different number of countries. This is of particular relevance when overall results are analysed. The second Erasmus survey thus included all New Member states, which were not included in the first Erasmus survey. As such, whole survey averages in terms of the economic situation of students, parental background,

etc. would have been affected by the different country coverage of both surveys – perhaps as much or more than by any other type of change.

The next section of the article presents results from the 2006 survey of Erasmus students, providing information on the profile of respondents, their overall assessment of the Erasmus period abroad and its effects (related to our first hypothesis), the cost of their Erasmus period (related to our second hypothesis) and, finally, their socio-economic background (related to our third hypothesis), including programme-wide results and some inter-country comparisons.

Results

Profile of respondents to the survey

Over 60% of Erasmus students in our sample were between 21 and 23 years of age. Two thirds were studying for Higher Education degrees of four to five years of duration. Two thirds of respondents were in their third or fourth year of study. Over 40% of respondents had undertaken an Erasmus study period between 5 and 6 months in length and just over 95% had enjoyed an Erasmus grant. Around 60% of respondents were female, 40% male, and the large majority (over 90%) were single. As it could be expected, respondents were highly competent in foreign languages. The vast majority of them spoke at least two languages (97%), three quarters (75%) had some competence in at least three languages and around a third (31%) in four languages. Our respondents were also, by and large, the first in their families to study abroad (82%), which highlights the importance of Erasmus as an instrumental tool to stimulate mobility for new populations.

Testing hypothesis one: overall motivation, assessment and effects

The importance of an equitable distribution of opportunities for participation in Erasmus amongst students from different socio-economic groups depends to some extent on why students undertake Erasmus periods abroad and the value of these periods. This section analyses the overall effect of Erasmus periods on the values, language proficiency and social integration of Erasmus students as well as on the duration of their studies. As mentioned above, other studies have found that the returns to participation in the programme in employability terms are diminishing. Erasmus does not provide significant salary gains or higher-level jobs. It was mainly efficient as a tool to accelerate entrance into the labour market – first job – but also in this dimension and probably partly given the increased access to the programme, the programme is staring to perform less well (Ballad and Williams 2004; University of Kassel, unpublished). Student participation in the programme, however, remains high and it is increasing – at a rate of almost

10% over the previous year in the academic year 2003/2004 (European Commission 2006). Given that the Erasmus period has certain associated economic costs (see next section), this is a surprising trend, which, we have hypothesised, can be explained given the ''personal gains'' of students. If this hypothesis is confirmed, it could be argued that the ''consumption'' versus the ''productive'' element of the programme has increased over the last years.

Indeed, there has been some discussion over whether, in the first instance, the positions defended by the initiators of Erasmus underlined the prevalence of professional and economic needs and the improvement of human capital as providing a rationale for the programme (Neave 1988; Papatsiba 2005; Wielemans 1991), even though, despite the dominant utilitarian approach, the social and cultural aspects of student mobility were not neglected in the programme (Papatsiba 2005). Previous observations (Balla and Williams 2004; Capelleras and Williams 2003; Papatsibe 2005; Figlewicz and Williams 2005; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003) that have noted, by contrast, that Erasmus students value the linguistic and cultural aspects of their placements more than the professional and academic ones were confirmed in or survey.

In our data we find a high degree of satisfaction with the programme, and important changes in the students that participate in it. This is more so on other aspects than in employment-related issues. Overall respondents were highly satisfied with their Erasmus period. Around 87% of them considered their overall experience abroad to have been positive/very positive, whereas only 2% considered their Erasmus experience poor/very poor. Students also reported a very high degree of social integration at their host university, slightly higher than for their home institution – 74% of students assessing their integration abroad as good/very good, and 72% in their home institution.

The Erasmus period abroad, moreover, shaped the attitudes and values of Erasmus students substantially. Over 58% of students reported that their Erasmus period had changed their career-related attitudes and aspirations to a large or some extent (the remainder 42% reporting partly, very little or no change) and around 60% of students mentioned changes to a large or some extent in personal values. Over 80% reported that it had involved broadening their general education to a large or some extent and over 92% reported that the period abroad had changed their understanding of people from another cultural or ethnic background to a large or some extent. The period, therefore, had more important consequences in citizenship and life-experience related areas than in career attitudes.

The period abroad, however, did have some consequences in terms of increasing the skills of the individuals that take part in it. Erasmus students had a high level of competence in foreign languages, and the survey findings show that the Erasmus period further increased this competence, which had been advanced as a main motivation to study abroad (Coleman 1998). The proportion of Erasmus students with at least some level of proficiency in a third language was 8 percentage points higher after their Erasmus period than at the start. For a fourth language the proportion was 14 percentage

points higher. Additionally, the command of languages in which students had some level of proficiency also increased substantially during the Erasmus period. About 25% more students were fluent in their second language at the end of their Erasmus period than at the start. Additionally, 15% more students were fluent in their third language at the end of their Erasmus period than before.

On the negative side, just over a quarter of Erasmus students who replied to the survey reported that their degree would take longer to complete given their Erasmus period abroad, due to time being added to their degree, problems adapting to the new system, problems of recognition or other factors (see also Teichler 2004). Overall, the Erasmus experience has, as outlined in this section, a large number of associated benefits for students. In the following section we turn to analyse the costs of this experience.

Testing hypothesis two: the cost of the Erasmus mobility period

This section looks at the reported costs of Erasmus periods and offers a self-assessment of the financial situation of Erasmus students. We hypothesise that net costs will be higher for students from lower income countries and that these will exhibit a higher socio-economic background than students from higher income countries. Although the Erasmus grant is intended to cover mobility costs for those students being mobile in the framework of networks of departments of the Inter-university Cooperation Programmes (ICPs) (Huisman 2004), we see in this section that this not the case for all types of students, which may deter participation from students from particular socio-economic backgrounds – see also next section.

According to our survey, the average monthly expenditure per student during the Erasmus period was €699. This compares to an average monthly expenditure in a student's home country of €586. The major single item explaining this difference in monthly costs is accommodation – around 40% of Erasmus students lived with their parents when studying in their home institution whereas less then 2% did so during their Erasmus period. Changes in accommodation arrangements resulted in an average difference in accommodation costs between home and host country of around €90 per month. As it could be expected, food and travel costs also increased during the period of study abroad but to a lesser extent (by around €40 and €36 per month respectively). Other forms of expenditure (such as books) did not on average vary significantly during the Erasmus period.

Although the total expense for the average student during their Erasmus period is higher than their expenditure at home, this would be covered by the average Erasmus grant for the year 2004/2005, which was €140 per month according to administrative Erasmus data – compared to €120 per month in the year 1997/87 (European Commission 2000). Moreover, students in our sample reported an average Erasmus grant of €200 per month, greater than the average grant reported by administrative sources. The distribution of the

grant, moreover, reflected to some extent the socio-economic background of students, although differences on average were not high for the programme as a whole. Students reporting a parental income considerably higher than average reported an average Erasmus grant of €191 per month whereas those reporting a parental income considerably below average reported an Erasmus grant of €245 per month. Some countries, like Belgium, do indeed take into account the socio-economic background of students in the distribution of Erasmus grants – whereas others do not.

The difference between the administrative data on the Erasmus grant and the survey data may be due to students recording as part of their ''Erasmus grant'' additional financial support gained for their Erasmus period from regional and national governments and universities – although differences could also be due to biases in the profile of respondents. This would imply that Erasmus students, after having pooled financial resources from different sources, would, on average, have their additional expenditure more than covered for their mobility periods abroad.

Although this is the rule for the average student, the situation differs between those who were living at home and those who were living away from home before the start of their Erasmus period – something ignored by aggregate analyses presented in most previous articles which report on the financial situation of Erasmus students, although not in the first Commission Erasmus survey. Students who lived at home prior to Erasmus increased their average expenses by €191 per moth during their period abroad, to €685, which would not be covered by the average Erasmus grant of €140 reported from administrative sources although it would be covered by the average of €200 reported in our survey.

This data would need to be qualified since it would appear that, in responding to the financial questions of the survey, students did not correctly take into account course fees. Allowing properly for these paints a worse picture for these students in terms of the shortfall between additional expenditure and the Erasmus grant. The survey data shows that respondents reported a decrease in course fees above €70 (from €91 in the home country to €18 in the host country). Since Erasmus students have to pay fees in their home country, it seems that respondents may have registered in the survey mainly what they saw as additional costs in fees (e.g. cost of new university cards, etc.) in the host country but not the expense incurred in fees in their home country during their Erasmus year. If we factor this into our calculations, the additional expense per month for a student who had been living at home the year prior to Erasmus would be €282, or around €2,538 for an academic year of 9 months, which would not be covered by the Erasmus grant, nor by other additional grants and would need to be covered by alternative means (mainly family, work, loans).

Students who lived away from home prior to Erasmus, by contrast, had an average expense of €630 in their home university, and €697 during their Erasmus period (an increase of €67). If we factor in course fees in the same

way as above the difference in expense between home and host country for this type of student is around €122 per month. This difference would be covered by the average Erasmus grant of €140 and by the average Erasmus grant reported for this type of student in our survey (€200).

On average, however, the net cost per student per month varied significantly by home country. Table 1 shows how students from some countries (such as Slovenia, Spain or Portugal) increased their net expense by over €130 per month, whereas students from other countries actually registered savings during their Erasmus period (like in the case of students from Belgium or Bulgaria).

Overall, individuals from middle to low GDP countries were those who suffered a greater ''net cost'' for their Erasmus periods, although the

Table 1. Average additional monthly expense per country and parental background of Erasmus students 2004/2005 by degree of economic development

	GDP level (EU27 = 100, PPP adjusted)	Monthly expense during Erasmus period	Net cost per Erasmus month (*)	Percentage respondents high or very high parental income
Austria	129	750	−10	39.7
Belgium	124	828	52	43.0
Bulgaria	34	544	42	25.1
Check Republic	76	511	−3	35.1
Denmark	124	961	−64	42.9
Finland	116	810	−3	30.2
France	112	758	8	48.7
Germany	116	699	−37	45.6
Greece	85	847	−12	37.6
Hungary	64	590	−50	33.6
Iceland	130	1,210	−39	42.2
Ireland	141	714	13	41.8
Italy	108	765	−53	24.5
Latvia	45	592	−23	38.1
Lithuania	51	599	−103	33.0
Netherlands	130	915	−123	62.1
Norway	165	1,024	−56	48.5
Poland	51	526	−56	47.7
Portugal	75	776	−139	39.0
Romania	34	561	−30	30.8
Slovakia	57	514	−24	17.7
Slovenia	83	662	−169	36.6
Spain	101	801	−146	30.5
Sweden	120	827	−36	38.2
Turkey	28	700	−94	35.9
UK	122	797	−86	51.2

Source: Own calculations from Souto Otero and McCoshan (2006) and Eurostat. (*) Negative sign indicates cost, positive sign a saving.

relationship between national GDP level and net cost was not too pronounced. This is, as the table shows, mainly explained because of the low expenditure levels of students from lower GDP countries during their period abroad. Indeed, the eight countries whose students registered an average expense whilst abroad below €600 are low GDP countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia). Students from some other countries, for instance Iceland, Norway or Denmark spent almost twice this amount during their Erasmus periods.

The table also shows that, also contrary to what could be expected, there are complex relationships at play between the socio-economic background of students and the level of economic development of the country of origin. It is mainly in high GDP countries (the Netherlands, Norway, UK, France) that we see the highest proportions of students reporting that their parents had a "higher than average" or "substantially higher than average" income level compared to other people in their country. By contrast, it is in some of the poorer countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia – although also in Spain, Italy and Finland) that we see a lower proportion of students reporting that their parents had such income levels. This may highlight different motivations for mobility in different sets of countries. Whereas in some high-income countries mobility may be mainly a "consumption" item for the better-off, it may also be an "investment" for less well-off people from poorer countries, who may invest in a period of study abroad in order to achieve employment in their countries of destination. The next section develops the analysis of the socio-economic background of Erasmus students in more detail.

Testing hypothesis three: socio-economic background

Results from the 2006 survey

Measures of socio-economic status are a subject of much discussion (see, for instance Mueller and Parcel 1981). The 2006 Erasmus survey used relative parental occupation, parental education and parental income as proxies for socio-economic background of students. Results from the survey indicate that Erasmus students are more likely to come from households with parents in high-level occupations than the incidence of these occupations in the general population would predict. Therefore, Erasmus students come largely from privileged socio-economic backgrounds.

Thus, a large proportion (29%) of students had both parents who worked as executives, professionals or technicians. A further 23% had a father in those occupational groups, whereas 9% had his/her mother in that group. So overall, almost two thirds of students (around 61%) had at least one parent in these occupations. This proportion is higher than that found in the general population, where less than 40% of people in employment aged 45 and over occupy such jobs (European Commission 2000: 14). Inter-country variations were notable within these figures in the survey, with the proportion of students

with both parents being in executive, professional or technical occupations being 38% or above in Bulgaria, Hungary, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden and the UK but only around 20% in Austria, Greece, Ireland and Italy. At the other end of the occupational classification, 14% of students had one parent either not seeking employment or unemployed, and 0.5% of them had both parents either not seeking employment or unemployed.

A second indicator of socio-economic background for which information was captured in the survey was parental education. Overall, around 58% of students had at least one parent who had experienced Higher Education (35% of students had both parents who had experienced Higher Education, an additional 13% had a father only with Higher Education and a further 10% a mother only). Again, the inter-country variation in the proportion of students with both parents with HE experience ranged from more than 50% in Bulgaria, Denmark, Hungary and Norway to less than 25% in Austria, Ireland and Italy.

In the light of these characteristics of the Erasmus student body, it is perhaps not surprising to find that a large majority of Erasmus students reported the income status of their parents as being average or above average. Overall, almost half of respondents (48%) reported it as being average; just under a third (31%) considered it to be higher than average and a further 6% considered it to be considerably higher than average. Only 14% of students reported their parents' income status as being lower or considerably lower than average – see previous section for cross-country variations.

This would seem to confirm results from previous studies which found that in general the mobile students present a "fairly select group as compared to the average students…" (Teichler and Jahr 2001: 447). Indeed, Teichler (2004) has raised the issue that we do not know how many students do not learn about Erasmus and we do not know how many want to study abroad in its framework but do not obtain a grant (Teichler 2004). More importantly for this article, there was very little data on non-participation due to the socio-economic background of students. In other words, even if we know about the relatively high socio-economic profile of Erasmus students: are economic reasons deterring any potential Erasmus students from getting involved in the programme?

Available information suggests that non-participation in Erasmus is more often due to self-selection on the part of the students than to selection by the institutions (Teichler 2004). Indeed, a substantial number of applicants who have been awarded a grant change their mind at a very late stage. This may be due to the economic costs of the period not being fully examined by students before their application. The 2006 survey found that over one half of the respondents (53%) had friends who had looked into participating in the programme but had not done so (before or after applying) mainly for financial reasons. About 46% knew some students and 6% many students who had not participated in the programme for these reasons. As it could be expected, students from affluent countries, with a greater tradition of mobility

and high levels of education tended to have fewer friends who were unable to participate in Erasmus due to financial reasons. The proportion of students who knew at least some students who had been unable to take part in the programme for these reasons was lowest (25% or below) in Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Netherlands, Sweden and, interestingly, Latvia. The proportion was highest (above 60%) in Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey and Portugal. Whilst Erasmus is therefore catering more for students from well-off backgrounds and a proportion of students are deterred from participation in the programme due to economic reasons, there seems to have been, however, some progress in attracting people from less well-off backgrounds in the last five years – see next section.

Trends over a decade

This section outlines the main trends observed in the different surveys (ECOTEC 2006; European Commission 2000; HIS 2005) in relation to the financial situation and the socio-economic background of students. We hypothesised in our introduction that participation in Erasmus would be elastic depending on the amount of grant received. Since this has not increased substantially over the last ten years (only €20 per month), we expected the profile of students to have remained constant in this period.

Over the decade up to the second survey, however, there seems to have been some progress in the widening of access to Erasmus, showing that participation in the programme is not fully elastic in relation to the grant. In 1997/1998 a large proportion (32%) of Erasmus students had both parents who worked as executives, professionals or technicians. A further 30% had a father in those occupational groups, whereas 6% had his/her mother in that group. Overall, over two thirds (68%) had at least one parent in these occupations, compared to 61% in 2004/2005. In 2004/2005, therefore, 39% of students reported not having any parent working in executive, professional or technical occupations as opposed to 32% in 1997/1998 – comparisons with EUROSTUDENT data for a wider of university students who have not taken part in Erasmus is not possible since EUROSTUDENT only reports on the proportion of fathers/mothers of Higher Education with "working class" status. Similarly, there seems to have been some progress in attracting people from less well-off backgrounds over the decade in question when measured by parental income. The proportion of students reporting their parental income as average or below average was 53% in the 1997/1998 survey, whereas the result in the 2004/2005 survey was 63%.

By contrast, there has been a less marked shift when parental background is considered in terms of level of education. In 1997/1998, 60% of students had at least one parent who had completed a degree or other Higher Education qualification whereas in the 2004/2005 survey the figure was 58%. These figures are still higher than those for Higher Education students in general, according to data from the EUROSTUDENT survey (direct comparisons between the two surveys, however, should be made with some precaution

since EUROSTUDENT reports on fathers and mothers with Higher Education whereas our survey also included other forms of participation in Higher Education) and much higher than those from the general population.

In the EUROSTUDENT survey, the country with the highest rate of fathers with Higher Education was Finland at 48% (28% for the general population), but most countries were in the bracket 25–35% (figures varying mostly between 10% and 20% for the total population). These trends were relatively similar for mothers, even if figures were somewhat lower for most countries for that group. Therefore, data suggests that students in Higher Education have parents that are on average educated to a much higher level than the average in the population and Erasmus students (with an average of 49% of parents with Higher Education in our survey – one percentage point above the leader of the EUROSTUDENT survey) have even substantially more well-educated parents than other Higher Education students.

Conclusions

This article used survey data to analyse financial aspects in relation to Erasmus periods of study abroad, a so far widely neglected area. The article thus aims to fill an important gap in our knowledge about the programme. Three main hypotheses were advanced to guide the study: first, that Erasmus periods of study abroad, although registering decreasing returns in terms of employability, continue to have a strong personal effects on their participants; second, that students from poorer countries would be from a higher socio-economic background than students from richer countries and that the net cost of their Erasmus period would be higher; third, that the socio-economic profile of students would not have changed significantly over the last decade.

With regard to the first hypothesis, we have seen that Erasmus students value their experience abroad highly. They are normally the first in their families to study abroad and assess their period positively in terms of overall experience, learning infrastructure and social integration. They improve their language skills in the languages they already speak and often learn new languages. The period also has a profound impact on their values towards learning and towards other people. It also broadens the education of students. This would place participation in the programme as beginning to be, at least for part of the student body that enters the programme, closer to citizenship issues than to purely labour market aspects, which could have important consequences when thinking about access to it, as explained further below in these conclusions.

In relation to the second hypothesis, we have seen that there are complex trends at play: it is in the richer counties that students from families in the higher national income levels participate in the programme more often. By contrast, it is in the poorer countries that we see fewer people from higher socio-economic backgrounds participating in the programme. This may

highlight two different motivations for mobility in different countries with a prevalence of mobility for "consumption" from higher socio-economic groups in higher income countries versus mobility for "investment" in search of better employment opportunities (in particular abroad) from less well off people from lower income countries. Data reveal, moreover, that individuals from certain middle- to low-income countries are those who suffer a greater "net cost" of the Erasmus period, although the relationship between country income and additional expense is – somewhat surprisingly – not too clear or pronounced as an explanation of differences in spending behaviour between students from lower and higher income countries during their period abroad.

Finally, in relation to the third hypothesis we find that, in spite of the still existing important socio-economic barriers to the take-up of the programme, access has been moderately widened over the last decade, although there are still important socio-economic barriers in relation to the take-up of the programme, with a large proportion of students coming from families with an economic status above the average in their country. There are today more students from average and below-average economic backgrounds participating in the programme than before. Erasmus students also exhibit a higher proportion of parents working at executive, professional and technical levels than would be expected for Higher Education students in general, although there is great variation amongst countries, and few have economically inactive or unemployed parents. Yet the occupational background of parents is not as important as their educational background in determining the participation of students in the programme. A very large proportion of Erasmus students have parents with higher education, and the proportion has not changed a great deal since the last student survey. Parents with higher education may be more aware of the Erasmus programme and its benefits, may be more encouraging in relation to the education of their offspring or may be willing to ensure that their children do "something more" than they did when they studied for their degrees. A period of study abroad can satisfy that requirement and therefore parents with higher education may be more receptive to Erasmus than parents with similar occupational backgrounds or levels of income but lower educational levels. For students whose parents have had no experience of Higher Education access to this may be considered a sufficient achievement in itself.

In spite of the widening of access to the programme, however, there are still many students who cannot participate in the programme due to financial reasons. Over half of the Erasmus students who participated in the programme in 2004/2005 knew other students who had been deterred from participating in the programme mainly due to financial reasons.

Although the Erasmus programme is not a social policy measure and there are limitations in relation to what it can achieve in terms of equality of access by different groups of the population (e.g. the programme will in this regard be necessarily affected by national differences in the socio-economic background of Higher Education students compared to the country's population),

it could be argued that it is important for the programme to provide the same opportunity for participation to all students regardless of their socio-economic background, given the benefits it offers. Yet, little thought has so far been given in the programme to the socio-economic background of participants and its redistributive effects. Thus, it would deserve closer examination if the programme, as currently designed, presents a subsidization of a personal consumption benefit that does not increase the productive potential of students in particular in the view of the decreasing labour returns it faces. According to Messer and Wolter (2005) public funding would only be justified if a positive impact of the programme on productivity could be established and if some students were not mobile because of credit constraints. Yet, we have seen that the programme also offers important "citizenship" benefits to participants, which could justify public intervention.

In this respect the key question would be how to distribute the limited public funds available amongst potential participants in the programme. Currently, existing public funds are directed towards students who already have the means to afford periods of study abroad. Some of these students, moreover, spend substantially more than the experience of other students – mainly those from poorer countries – suggests is needed to live abroad. These students would probably pay for their mobility periods from their private funds if no subsidy was available (Messer and Wolter 2005) as the increasing volume of "spontaneous" mobility suggests (OECD 2005, 2006).

Different notions of social justice would argue in favour of alternative distributions of the programme resources – or would even lead to different views as to whether funding should be available for the programme at all. An analysis of these would give way to a wide-ranging debate that we cannot enter here, but it is important to highlight that so far the interest of stakeholders (in particular European institutions) in relation to the programme has been in expanding the number of students taking part in it, and this has had consequences in relation to the profile of students benefiting from access to Erasmus. The debate about the socio-economic dimension of the programme should, in our view, be opened further now. If it is, it is likely to demand a strong re-shaping of Erasmus – yet this is unlikely, given the strong continuous focus of the programme on expanding the number of participants without putting much regard to the composition of the student population accessing it.

For instance, it could be argued that greater emphasis should be put into the financing of the programme so as to enable the participation in the programme of people who now cannot take part due to financial reasons – perhaps by reducing the number of grants and making them more substantial. This should be measured against the administrative costs of setting up schemes that take into account the economic background of students. A more nuanced allocation of funds by home and host country would also benefit the participation of a wider set of students in the programme since

these aspects still have an impact on the financial situation of students due to differences in the cost of living.

Actions to address barriers to participation in the programme for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, however, should also entail undertaking further dissemination of information about the programme and its benefits amongst the student and parental population – in particular to those who know less about the programme. This may not require great investment from EU institutions, but could involve, for instance, information and feedback sessions from previous Erasmus students still at university.

Note

1. The survey on the socio-economic conditions of Erasmus students upon which this article is based was financed by the Directorate General of Education and Culture of the European Commission. We would like to thank the Erasmus national agencies and the institutions of Higher Education that participated in the Erasmus programme during the year 2004/2005 for their support and contribution to the implementation of the survey. The analysis of the survey results is the responsibility of the author and does not reflect the views of the European Commission, Erasmus National Agencies or the participant Higher Education institutions.

References

Balaz, V., and A. M. Williams. 2004. ''Been There, Done That'': International Student Migration and Human Capital Transfers from the UK to Slovakia. *Population, Space and Place* 10: 217–237.

Barblan, A., M. Reichert, M. Schotte-Kmoch and U. Teichler. 2000. *Implementing European Policies in Higher Education Institutions*. Kassel: Centre for Research on Higher Education and Work. *Werkstattberichte*: 57.

Baron, B., and A. Smith. 1987. *Higher Education in the European Community: Study Abroad in the European Community*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

Burn, B. B., L. Cerych and A. Smith (eds.). 1990. *Study Abroad Programmes*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Capelleras, J.-L., and J. Williams. 2003. Student Satisfaction in Britain and Spain: A Comparative Analysis in Two Universities. Paper Presented at the 25th EAIR Forum, Limerick, Ireland, August 24–27.

Coleman, J. A. 1998. Language Learning and Study Abroad: The European Perspective. *Frontiers* 4(1): 167–203.

Enders, J. 2004. Higher Education, Internationalisation, and the Nation-State: Recent Developments and Challenges to Governance Theory. *Higher Education* 47: 361–382.

European Commission. 2000. *Survey into the Socio-Economic Background of Erasmus Students*. Brussels: European Commission, DG Education and Culture.

European Commission. 2006. *Administrative Data on the Erasmus Programme*. Unpublished CD. Brussels: European Commission.

Figlewicz, R., and J. Williams. 2005. How Satisfied are Erasmus Students? Paper Presented to the 27th Annual EAIR Forum, 28 to 31 August 2005, Riga, Latvia.

HIS. 2005. *EUROSTUDENT Report 2005. Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe 2005*. Langenhagen.

Huisman, J. 2004. The Impact of the Erasmus Programme on National Policy-Making. Paper Presented at the Annual NIG Conference, Rotterdam, 29 October 2004.

Kälvermark, T., and M. C. van der Wende (eds.). 1997. *National Policies for Internationalisation of Higher Education in Europe*. Stockholm: National Agency for Higher Education.

King, R., and E. Ruiz-Gelices. 2003. International Student Migration and the European "Year Abroad": Effects on European Identity and Subsequent Migration Behaviour. *International Journal of Population Geography* 9: 229–252.

Maiworm, F., and U. Teichler (ed.). 2002. The Students' Experience. In: *Erasmus in the SOCRATES Programme*, ed. by U. Teichler, 83–116. Bonn: Lemmens.

Maiworm, F., W. Steube, and U. Teichler. 1991. Learning in Europe. The Erasmus Experience, A Survey of the 1988–1989 Erasmus Students, Higher Education Policy Series 14. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

——. 1993. Experiences of Erasmus Students 1990/1991, Werkstattberichte Band 42, Kassel: Wissenschaftliches Zentrum fur Berufs- und Hochschulforschung der Universitat Kassel.

Messer, D., and C. Wolter. 2005. Are Student Exchange Programmes Worth it? *IZA Discussion Paper 1656*. Institute for the study of Labor (IZA).

Mueller, C. W., and W. Karle. 1993. Social Selection in Educational Systems in Europe. *European Sociological Review* 9(1): 1–23.

Mueller, C. W., and T. L. Parcel. 1981. Measures of Socio-economic Status: Alternatives and Recommendations. *Child Development* 52(1): 13–30.

Neave, G. 1988. On the Cultivation of Quality, Efficiency and Enterprise: An Overview of Recent Trends in Higher Education in Western Europe, 1986–1988. *European Journal of Education*, 23: 7–21.

OECD. 2005. *Education at a Glance*. Paris: OECD.

OECD. 2006. *Education Policy Analysis: Focus on Higher Education 2005–06*. Paris: OECD.

Opper, S., U. Teichler, and J. Carlson. 1990. *Impact of Study Abroad Programmes on Students and Graduates*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Papatsiba, V. 2005. Political and Individual Rationales of Student Mobility: A Case-study of Erasmus and a French Regional Scheme for Studies Abroad. *European Journal of Education* 40(2): 173–188.

Rosselle, D., and A. Lentiez. 1999. *The Erasmus Programme 1987–1995: A Qualitative Review*. Lille: Pôle Universitaire Européen.

Souto Otero, M., and A. McCoshan. 2006. *Survey of the Socio-economic Background of Erasmus Students*. Final Report to the European Commission, Birmingham.

Teichler, U. 1991. *Experiences of Erasmus Students. Select Findings of the 1988/1989 Survey*, Werkstattberichte Band 32. Kassel: Wissenschaftliches Zentrum für Berufs- und Hochschulforschung der Universitat Kassel.

——. 1996. Student Mobility in the Framework of Erasmus: Findings of an Evaluation Study. *European Journal of Education* 31(2): 153–179.

——. 1999. Internationalisation as a Challenge for Higher Education in Europe. *Tertiary Education and Management* 5: 5–23.

——. 2004. Temporary Study Abroad: The Life of Erasmus Students. *European Journal of Education* 39(4): 395–408.

Teichler, U., and V. Jahr. 2001. Mobility During the Course of Study and After Graduation. *European Journal of Education* 36(4): 443–458.

Teichler, U., and F. Maiworm. 1997. *The Erasmus Experience: Major Findings of the Erasmus Evaluation Research Project*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Community.

Teichler, U., and W. Stuber. 1991. The Logics of Study Abroad Programmes and Their Impacts. *Higher Education* 21: 325–349.

UNESCO. 1997. *Statistical Yearbook 1997*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO. 1999. *Statistical Yearbook 1999*. Paris: UNESCO.

van der Wende, M. C. 2001. The International Dimension in National Higher Education Policies: What Has Changed in Europe in the Last Five Years?. *European Journal of Education* 36(4): 431–441.

——. 2002. Internationalisation Policies: About New Trends and Contrasting Paradigms. *Higher Education Policy* 14: 249–259.

Wielemans, W. 1991. Erasmus Assessing Erasmus. *Comparative Education* 27(2): 165–180.

Woessmann, L. 2004. *How Equal are Educational Opportunities? Family Background and Student Achievement in Europe and the US*. Cesifo Working Paper 1162. March 2004.

The author

Manuel Souto Otero is a Tutor in Comparative Education at the Department of Social Policy and Social Work of the University of Oxford and Pembroke College, Oxford, England. His main areas of interest are in the areas of higher and further education policy and active labour market policies from a comparative perspective, and internationalisation in education.

Contact address: Social Policy and Social Work, University of Oxford, Barnett House, 32 Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2ER, UK. E-mail: manuelsoutootero@gmail.com.