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Title International Academic Staff Mobility: The Challenges of Attracting and Retaining Academic Talent in Central and Eastern European Higher Education Systems

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Summary

This presentation will provide insights into the situation of academic staff mobility in the peripheral higher education systems of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. The main research question is: *What are facilitating factors and barriers to attracting and retaining academic talent in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries?*

Our findings are based on two studies on academic staff mobility – both incoming and outgoing – in CEE countries. Taking the higher education systems of Lithuania, the Czech Republic, and Estonia as examples, we compare national framework conditions for mobility, motivations of individual researchers for both incoming and outgoing mobility, identify incentives and barriers for mobility, and provide examples of institutional coping strategies for dealing with existing patterns of mobility.

Outline

Academic staff mobility is often associated with excellence in teaching and research as well as increased international visibility and reputation of universities. Yet, mobility does not always affect all parties equally. Instead, it can be witnessed that academic centres, usually located in larger and wealthier countries, attract flows of academic centres from the peripheries (Altbach, 2004; Hughes, 2005; Scott, 2015).

This presentation will provide insights into the situation of academic staff mobility in the peripheral higher education systems of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. The main research question is: *What are facilitating factors and barriers to attracting and retaining academic talent in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries?*

Our findings are based on two recently published studies of academic staff mobility in CEE countries. These studies have been informed by existing literature on academic staff mobility, including motivations and barriers to mobility, and the role of institutional and governmental strategies and policies for mobility (e.g. Cradden, 2007; Teichler, 2015) and are grounded in qualitative social science methodology. We compare the situation in different CEE countries (Lithuania, the Czech Republic, and Estonia). For this purpose we have conducted a literature and document review of the national framework conditions for mobility in these countries, a survey (N=127) of the intentions and motivations of Lithuanian academics to go and stay abroad, and a case study of a Lithuanian university, for which we have conducted semi structured interviews with policy makers, administrators, and international as well as local academics. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed according to qualitative content analysis method (Mayring, 2007).

The higher education systems of CEE countries have traditionally been closed and have slowly been opening up since the beginning of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early

1990s. Although all of the systems that we have studied have joined the Bologna process in 1999 and are part of the European Research Area, where mobility imperatives are high, they perform relatively poor with regard to incoming academic staff mobility.

We have found significant differences between the studied systems with regard to the existence of national and institutional policies and strategies that promote academic staff mobility as well as with regard to the international openness and transparency of recruitment processes within these systems.

Overall, we conclude that higher education internationalization strategies of CEE countries focus preliminarily on student mobility and short-term, outgoing academic staff mobility, whereas long-term, incoming academic staff mobility is barely mentioned. Data analysis shows that incoming and returning academics were mainly motivated by personal reasons, such as family (reuniting with spouses or family or wanting children to grow up in a familiar environment), or – with regard to the Baltic states – a general interest in the language, culture and history of the destination country. In some cases, respondents originating from countries where higher education systems suffer from unfavourable conditions due to austerity measures, have moved to CEE countries in order to pursue career opportunities that they would lack at home. Main barriers to mobility included salary levels, a lack of availability of research funding, and language.

We have identified several unfavourable aspects of institutional and national framework conditions for international academic staff mobility in the studied systems. In the future, both governments and institutions should consider the creation of more favourable conditions, including, for example, easier immigration for researchers and their families from non-EU countries, more transparent recruitment and hiring processes, and the removal of language barriers with regard to legal and administrative issues and language requirements for research proposals.

Our research findings contribute to the current state of art of research of international academic staff mobility by providing insights into challenges of attracting and retaining academic talent in the peripheral, post-Soviet higher education systems of CEE countries, which are currently facing very strong imperatives for internationalisation. Due to demographic downturn, increased emigration rates, an aging academic workforce, and increasing demands for international visibility and reputation, attracting foreign students and academic staff will become an ever more important aspect to ensure the competitiveness and ultimately the survival of higher education systems in CEE countries. Moreover, we are witnessing increasing populism, nationalist tendencies, and strong public anti-immigration discourses in many places world-wide and conditions for recruiting and retaining foreign academic talent are changing in many countries, such as the United Kingdom or the United States, due to recent political developments. This might lead to significant changes of direction in international academic mobility trends. Provided that they do not follow the trend towards increasing national isolation, and anticipating that they will follow regional examples of decreasing barriers for incoming mobility such as those presented in our studies, we expect that CEE countries could significantly increase the attractiveness of their higher education systems for talented academics from abroad.

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