

European Students' Union (ESU)

Fighting for students' rights since 1982

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Annex on Brain Drain

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Brain drain, as the loss of skilled persons as they permanently move from one jurisdiction to the other, is a phenomenon that can affect students, academics or workers, and can have different dimensions based on the territorial disparities at the regional, national, European or global levels¹. While the student, labour and academic brain drain are intertwined and linked to the international division of labour and the general economic prospects of a region, specific policies at the Higher Education level can mitigate or exacerbate brain drain.

Internationalisation fostering Brain Drain

At the intra-EHEA level, Internationalisation measures at the Higher Education level can indirectly foster brain drain when the increase in the number of international students in one country is not matched by policies to attract international students within the sending countries, therefore creating an imbalance of mobility and brain drain instead of balanced

¹ For an analysis of brain drain in the European Higher Education Area, see Hammerbauer, M.; Pavletić, P.; Vespa, M., [Brain drain in Higher Education - European Context](#), European Students' Union, Brussels, 2021.

mobility and brain circulation. The first line of differentiation is between EU and non-EU countries, as the former cannot make distinctions between home and EU students, while tuition fees for international students are higher than those for home students in two-thirds of the EHEA countries². Language policies are one of the first elements in attracting international students, i.e. providing degrees in widely spoken languages (normally English), while degrees in languages that are spread in a supraregional area (e.g. French, German, Spanish) can attract international students speaking those languages. In choosing whether to study abroad, there is an analysis of the expected benefit of studying in a different country vis-à-vis studying in the home country (in terms of quality of education, employability and reputation of the title, i.e. its 'expendability' in the labour market) and of the difference in costs associated with either choice. For what regards international students to whom 'international tuition fees' apply, the 'expendability' of the title is privileged, in a commodifying spiral where rank-based reputation and increase in tuition fees are correlated. For what regards EU students in EU countries or international students in countries where there are not differentiated 'international tuition fees', differences in terms of enrolment, tuition fees and student welfare, together with the perceived quality of education, play an important role in the study choices. This makes an upward convergence of student rights and conditions one of the most important paths toward tackling the economic causes of student brain drain.

Mitigating Brain Drain through mobility schemes across EHEA

The attempted answers to the imbalance mobilities in previous years have been focusing not on addressing the structural causes of brain drain, but rather on 'alleviating' a perceived 'burden' upon the receiving countries. This was the talk within the EHEA when discussing intergovernmental talks to imbalance mobilities as expressed in the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué or the proposal that sending countries would pay for the living costs of the students (with possible top-ups from the receiving countries). These solutions, which were based on the goodwill of the sending countries to pay additional costs to the indirect ones caused by brain drain, were never really implemented. ESU believes that palliative, non-implementable solutions cannot be the way forward to tackle brain drain, especially if they do not address the root causes of the phenomenon. On the other hand, degree mobility schemes that allow joint programmes between traditionally sending and traditionally receiving countries can help both as retention mechanisms and as brain circulation schemes. To this end, establishing regional balance within cooperation agreements such as the European Universities Alliances can be a way to combat brain drain through collaboration.

² Golovic, R.; Berger, S., [Functional overview tuition fees](#), European Students' Union, 2020.

Institutional approaches toward Brain Drain mitigation

Many policies witness EHEA's and EU's commitment to internationalisation, such as the 1994 Council Resolution on the admission of third-country nationals to the territory of the Member States of the EU for study purposes, internationalisation commitments under the Bologna Declaration in 1999, or the 2015 European Agenda on Migration and through the Erasmus+ Programme. The Council and the European Parliament adopted the Students and Researchers Directive in 2016 and the 2005 Directive on researchers. These commitments are promoting youth and student mobility in the context of internationalisation, but they also promote researchers' mobility within the European Research Area (ERA) which aims to have a unified approach to the creation of the 'internal market' for research, developing effective European-level coordination of national research policies and commitments, and to assure their implementation. EURAXESS was developed specifically to promote internationalisation. However, on the institutional level, the internationalisation efforts often result in higher tuition fees for international students, and promotion efforts to attract foreign students, without proper institutional regard for contributing to the brain drain.

ESU strongly opposes the institutional efforts contributing to the social inequalities between students, regardless of their country of origin, and believes all students deserve to have the same opportunities to access and participate in higher education. Furthermore, ESU supports all national and HEI's efforts for student retention that will allow students to integrate into society, wherever it may be across EHEA. Such may involve, but are not limited to:

- Career counselling and job-orientation services that help students in finding employment;
- Assessment of the institutional internationalisation efforts to implement socially-aware practices;
- Active collaboration with the representatives from the industry to assure smoother transition of international students into the labour market;
- Governmental measures in support of brain circulation by removing the restrictions in the labour market for international students (i.e. labour market examinations, salary thresholds);
- Effective bilateral and multilateral agreements for easier progression either in studies or employment;
- Full implementation of automatic recognition, especially between joint programmes and similar initiatives;
- Further support, promotion and implementation of lifelong learning opportunities and practices;
- Governmental and institutional support of family reunification processes;
- Free language courses in the host country for the international students;
- Students representatives directly supporting international students;

- Encouraging the development of dedicated international student structures in the hosting universities;
- Fostering social interaction between international students and the host country students.

Supporting Brain circulation in research

ESU fully supports open science in all levels and aspects of education and research, and strongly encourages all HEIs to adopt, promote and engage in the sharing of knowledge. Research is conducted at all levels of learning, and students should be able to contribute to open knowledge-sharing throughout their studies, regardless of their level of expertise. Additionally, once leaving higher education, citizens and young professionals should interact with the knowledge shared by the experts, through lifelong learning practices and citizen science.

The European Open Science Cloud (EOSC) should serve as a database among all stakeholders from the academy, industry and beyond, to “store, share, process and reuse research digital objects (like publications, data, and software) that are Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable (FAIR)”³.

Additionally, ESU is promoting the open science approach through the activities of the European Commission and through the European Research Area (ERA), but it recognizes the need to additionally link these frameworks to other global research efforts to benefit all the students in a truly international effort.

Socio-economic impact of brain drain on higher education

Following the outflow of people who are either current or prospective students, the HE system is losing the group which supports it and develops it. Brain drain can therefore lead to fewer opportunities for academic collaboration in the country and force young people to migrate elsewhere in their search for prospective partnerships. Following that, the shrinking quality and even the absence of a local academic sector can lead to a potential loss of essential services, which affects basic needs of society and individuals. Furthermore, it limits an eventual sustainable state development through potential inventions, business and societal ideas that could lead to improving the general condition of that given state. This includes unrealized political measures which would improve the legal framework and infrastructure in the country and could incentivize the youth to stay.

³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/our-digital-future/open-science_en

As the ratio of working to non-working population worsens, it also gets increasingly harder to provide means for economically inactive citizens. Public budgets affected this way make it difficult for states to distribute enough funds into investments in infrastructure and the Higher Education sector, which are crucial for attracting the local talent pool. All in all, when not addressed timely and properly, brain drain is a spiral leading to continuing societal problems which get increasingly harder to solve.

Examples of good practices across EHEA

A possible way to tackle the brain drain is to mimic the measures in countries that attract an educated and skilled workforce. A general trend that drives people to come to a given country is local economic growth, and while that depends on many factors, brain mobility can be largely linked to funds for Higher Education. States should therefore allocate resources to make their academic sector grow so that people are not forced to search abroad if they want to continue in their desired careers.

Some of the receiving countries are also appealing due to the comparatively low costs associated with studying. Countries suffering from brain drain should therefore abolish tuition fees, introduce sufficient financial and health related student support systems and take other measures that act as socio-economic pull factors and thus increase the appeal for students to study in their country.

Additionally, it needs to be assured that local HEIs are attractive to foreigners by creating a welcoming environment and enabling them to realise their potential just as the locals can. This can be assured by graduate counselling, working permits for non-nationals, internship opportunities, promotional activities, support services and governmental agreements in other countries, as used in countries such as Luxembourg, Ireland, or Finland. Using these measures to their advantage, HEIs then need to get more involved in academic exchanges such as the Erasmus+ and others, mainly on the receiving side. Regarding outgoing students, brain circulation can be fostered by scholarships, while encouraging students to maintain contact with their diaspora. In any case, people need to be able to imagine their future in the country, thus investments in infrastructure, access to services and public sector transparency must not be omitted either. In the medium-to-long term, upward convergence of student rights and of salaries can help in avoiding brain drain due to economic prospects.