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**Erasmus+ in the Eastern Partnership: Exploring International Student  
Mobility between Armenia and the European Union**

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## Abstract

This working paper presents some initial reflections from a research project on social inclusion in international student mobility, focusing on Erasmus+ and other forms of student exchange in Armenia.<sup>1</sup> Discussion starts with a brief overview of recent developments in the student mobility research field and an identification of geo-political factors that make Armenia strategically important for the European Union, and explain choice of research site. In what follows, we integrate perspectives from a workshop conducted with 45 students in Yerevan along with responses to follow-up questions, with additional perspectives provided by representatives of the Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC) Armenia and Armenian Progressive Youth (APY).<sup>2</sup> Considering the limited scope our research to date, this working paper is exploratory rather than a definitive statement on international student mobility to the EU in Armenia; however, in the forthcoming months we will be expanding the scope of our work, integrating emerging findings into future publications.

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<sup>1</sup> 'International Student Mobility: A Socio-Demographic Perspective' is a project is coordinated by David Cairns at the Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology, ISCTE-University Institute of Lisbon, funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (SFRH/BPD/103320/2014). The paper also draws upon the expertise of Marine Sargsyan, an expert in EU-Armenia affairs, based at Leiden University in The Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> The workshop was held on 3 February 2016 at the Centre for European Studies, Yerevan State University, whom, we would like to thank for their generous support and assistance, in particularly Kristine Gevorgyan. We would also like to thank Armenak Antinyan and Heghine Manasyan at Caucasus Research Resource Centre Yerevan, Maria Simonyan at Armenian Progressive Youth and Edith Soghomonian, Assistant Coordinator at the National Erasmus+ Office in Armenia, for their generous input.

## **Student Mobility and Erasmus+ in an International Context**

Within the EU and its affiliate countries, short duration international exchanges between universities in different countries have become relatively commonplace, with thousands of students, trainees and teachers now availing of opportunities provided by platforms such as the European Commission's Erasmus programme. Since the first Erasmus initiative in 1987, it is estimated that well over 3,000,000 Europeans have practiced international mobility through this means (European Commission, 2014), and this does not include the large numbers of less readily quantified students undertaking exchanges to various parts of the world via other exchange platforms.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, while still very much the exception rather than the rule, student circulation is a well-established feature of tertiary education in the EU, to extent of having become something of a symbol of European integration and a tool in the construction of shared cross-national identities (Sigalas, 2010; Wilson, 2010; Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013).

The current phase of the Erasmus initiative, known as Erasmus+ and succeeding the previous Lifelong Learning programme, is due to run between 2014 and 2020, covering mobility in tertiary education, training and sport.<sup>4</sup> The main difference between this programme and its predecessors is in its scope: integrating actions associated with the previous Youth in Action programme, it covers vocational training, voluntary work and exchanges for youth work professionals. In regard to resources, a budget of 14.7 million euros per annum has been allocated for the duration of the initiative, constituting a 40 per cent increase on the Lifelong Learning programme (European Commission, 2015a). However, the most high profile Erasmus action remains the undergraduate exchange platform: an example of what the EC defines as 'international credit mobility', with students receiving course accreditation for a stay of between 3 and 12 months at a foreign university upon return to their sending institutions. This arrangement applies to those who move between the 33 Programme nations (the EU28 plus affiliates), with partner regions including the countries of the South Caucasus, also eligible to participate in certain forms of exchange such as Erasmus Mundus Masters degree programmes (European Commission, 2015b). What

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<sup>3</sup> An approximate indication of levels of student migration is obtained from statistics collated by UNESCO, in its 'Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students' database, with the most recently published figures (2011/12) showing that around 4,000,000 students were studying outside their home countries, the largest numbers in Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, with the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, France, Germany and the Russian Federation also being important regional hubs for student migrants.

<sup>4</sup> While named after the Philosopher and Theologian, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1465-1536), the full backronym title of the programme is the *European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students* (European Commission, 2013).

this policy development implies is that the commitment of the EC to student mobility is substantial, sustained and far reaching in geographical scope, and given the high level of investment in mobility infrastructure during the lifetime of Erasmus+ and its perceived success among European policymakers, it is a programme that is likely to be sustained into the future.

These initial reflections lead us towards asking what is the place of Erasmus+ and other student exchange platforms within the broader schema of student mobility and graduate migration. While the task of describing some of the main characteristics of mobility systems is a relatively straightforward task, finding a theoretical identity for this form of circulation is more challenging. The usual solution among student mobility scholars is to describe Erasmus exchanges and the more exceptional practice of moving abroad for the entire duration of a degree programme as ‘International Student Mobility’ (ISM), and in doing so drawing upon paradigms from Migration Studies, a sub-discipline of Geography and to a lesser extent Sociology and Social Policy (see, for example, a review of literature conducted by King et al., 2010). Having established this paradigm, contemporary student mobility researchers have largely concentrated on conducting empirical studies of Erasmus within the EU, meaning that other facets of student circulation are correspondingly neglected within research agendas or not integrated into the ISM trope, including work that looks beyond credit mobility or engages with extra-EU contexts beyond micro-level examinations of relatively small groups of movers (Cairns, 2015a). For this reason, the existing body of work referred to as ISM should more accurately be referred to as *European Student Mobility*, with an additional caveat of noting that this term covers short-term, fixed duration moves as opposed to longer or more open-ended forms of circulation. Given our focus on Armenia, we are however in a position to look at movement from outside as opposed to within the EU, also taking into account the more migratory forms of circulation that have significance relevance for tertiary educated young people.<sup>5</sup>

Looking more closely at our Armenian research context, that much student mobility is taking place outside of the strictures of credit mobility is demonstrated by the existence of numerous scholarships, particularly since independence in 1991. Among the most important programmes have been Flex, Edmund S. Maskie, Fulbright, the Teaching Excellence and Achievement (TEA) Programme in the USA, DAAD in Germany, NUFFIC Scholarship in

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<sup>5</sup> Outward migration, particularly among graduates, has also emerged as a popular research theme in EU countries affected by the economic crisis (see Cairns et al. 2013, 2014, 1016).

the Netherlands, DANIDA scholarship in Denmark, SIDA scholarship in Sweden. Alongside these opportunities there are degree programmes funded by the governments of various developed countries (EU, United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, etc.), and several scholarships offered by universities and Armenian foundations. Among the Armenian foundations, it is worth mentioning the Calouste Gulbenkian Scholarship, that awards stipends not only for degree programmes (BA, MA, PhD) worldwide but also research grants and travel grants. Other Armenian foundations grant scholarships to Armenian students either relating to a specific field of study or the host country; for instance, the US, which has the second largest Armenian Diaspora population. The most famous examples are the AGBU Scholarship, Margarian Scholarship, Richard R. Tufenkian Scholarship and the Armenian International Women's Association Scholarship. The Luys Foundation also grants 50 per cent scholarship to those students who are admitted to study at selected top universities, limited to the following 10 universities: Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, MIT, Stanford, University of California, Berkeley, Princeton University, California Institute of Technology and Columbia University.<sup>6</sup> This scholarship-based approach to student mobility means that student mobility in Armenia has much a closer relationship to the *laissez faire* system of international migration rather than 'international student mobility' in the EU, providing us with an opportunity to learn about a relatively under-studied corner of our research field.

### **Student mobility and migration in Armenia**

While the EC has not published detailed statistics on the participation levels of Armenian students in Erasmus, the programme is likely to have few participants given that Armenia is neither an EU member state nor a candidate country.<sup>7</sup> In regard to the popularity of student migration, defined as studying abroad for more than a year in duration, a rough indication of levels of circulation is provided by figures compiled by UNESCO. In the most recent breakdowns, relating to 2012, it is suggested that there are 6,493 students from Armenia studying abroad, with Russia, France and Ukraine the most popular destinations, representing 5.6 per cent of the Armenian student population. At the same time there were

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.luys.am/en/content/view/univeristy-list>

<sup>7</sup> There does not seem to be any likelihood of change in the EU/Armenia relationship, particularly given its membership of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) which brings the country into close economic and political orbit with Russia. A discussion document published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation assesses the impact of the EU on Armenia as 'rather minimal', and forecasts situation to continue into the next decade (2015, p. 24).

4,466 incoming students to Armenia, mostly from Russia and Georgia, confirming the strength of ties to post-socialist countries.

The relationship between skills, migration and development is explored more in-depth in a recent report prepared by the European Training Foundation and Caucasus Research Resource Centre in Yerevan (2013), based on survey evidence from 2011 and 2012. While not a youth specific analysis, some important findings emerge regarding outward migration trends, including the popularity of the idea of moving abroad. 36 per cent of people aged between 18 and 50 years of age in Armenia were seriously considering leaving the country to live and work, with the likelihood of migration, taking into account access to the necessary social and economic resources as a predictor of outward movement, strongest among educated respondents. The main motivations for leaving included employment, or better quality employment compared to what was on offer in the domestic labour market, with Russia the most popular destination (ETF/CRRC, 2013, pp. 4-5). The overall scale of outward migration from Armenia is also crucial to note, with the number of Armenian migrants according to a 2010 World Bank survey cited in this report stated as 870,200 in number or 28.3 per cent of the total population, with the top destination countries being Russia, the US, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Israel, Germany, France, Spain and Greece (see World Bank, 2011). Significantly youth unemployment, especially among young women, urban dwellers and the highly educated, was cited in the 2013 report as one of the main drivers of outward movement. Further discussions with experts at the CRRC in Yerevan confirm the significance of this factor, along with the importance of tertiary education, in creating an education/migration nexus.

Nevertheless, that the EU has some level of interest in Armenia, extending to their local Erasmus+ representative participating in our Yerevan workshop, should not be ignored. And EU broader commitment to Armenia is demonstrated in the existence of European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) agreement.<sup>8</sup> In considering why the EU might be interested in Armenian affairs, we should point out a somewhat delicate geo-political situation in regard to relationships with adjacent Turkey and Azerbaijan, and the relatively close proximity of the Russian Federation to the north and Iran to the south. This

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<sup>8</sup> An EU-Armenia Joint Mobility Partnership was also signed on 27 October 2011, relating to sustaining dialogue and cooperation on legal migration, development and the fight against irregular migration. This particular agreement focuses on facilitating the movement of persons between Armenia and the EU, including temporary and circular migration, ensuring better management of migration flows and reducing irregular migration, and mitigating the negative effects of migration on the country of origin (ETF/CRRC, 2013, p. 20).

gives Armenia a strategically important position in regard to the key issues of energy and security: being adjacent to the Black Sea/Caspian Sea energy region and a natural corridor connecting Europe and Central Asia, meaning that maintaining economic and political stability in Armenia is an EU policy goal, albeit a somewhat indirect one. This brings us to consider Armenia's place in regard to the EU-Russia relationship, upon which the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 had a negative impact, subsequently worsened by the Ukrainian crisis and more recent events including the military escalation in Syria, the terrorist act in Paris, the downing of the Russian A321 airliner over Sinai in Egypt and shooting down of a Russian Su-24 jet by Turkey. While these issues may have implications for how the EU relates to Armenia, interviews with local experts in youth affairs in Yerevan did confirm that student mobility is not seen as a politically charged issue. While there might be concerns about brain drain to the EU, meaning the exit of tertiary educated young people with economically valuable skills, it was also pointed out that exchange visits to the EU were not perceived as a threat to Russian political hegemony in the South Caucasus, not least because the Russian Federation also participates in Erasmus+.

In regard to support from the EU to Armenian students, Armenia participates in three key actions relating as part of Erasmus+:

- Key Action 1 - Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees (a form of mobility for graduates, involving consortia of third level educational institutions in at least three different European countries) and credit mobility.
- Key Action 2 - Capacity Building Higher Education Projects (CBHE) and Knowledge Alliances and Strategic Partnerships.
- Key Action 3 - Support to policy dialogue through the network of Higher Education Reform Experts in Partner Countries neighbouring the EU, the international alumni association, policy dialogue with partner countries and international attractiveness and promotion events.

In regard to these three actions, only the first directly relates to students, the remaining two actions being directed at institutions, with additional Jean Monnet actions aimed at supporting teaching professionals. This means that much funding is being directed

towards institutional and policy levels rather than tertiary educated young people themselves. And while actions such as Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees are extremely valuable for those who participate, the numbers doing so are extremely small. This means that Erasmus+ is unlikely to be making a significant quantitative impact upon student life in Armenia at the present time. Other EC funded institutional mobility opportunities supported by Erasmus+ exist; for example, as part of the European Voluntary Service (EVS). In terms of participation levels, again participation levels are likely to be small. This is however still an opportunity for those who participate, many of whom are students or graduates (aged 17-30), to gain skills to enhance their employability. Like the undergraduate exchanges, EVS provides relatively short duration mobility opportunities, between two weeks and twelve months and following the principle of non-formal learning, with emphasis on the intercultural dimension of the exchanges (European Commission, 2015c, p. 3). The idea is therefore more one of changing how participants see the world, and perhaps themselves, rather than creating proto-migrants; in practice, this may include raised awareness of human rights issues, gender equality or combatting racism.

Given that Erasmus+ opportunities appear to be focusing on the development of soft skills, particularly with emphasis on employability rather than employment, the risk of initiating an outflow of economic migrants to the EU is, in theory, minimised. While this may be political expedient both for the EU and the Armenian government, the negative consequence is that in a country where there is a strong desire to undertake more migratory forms of mobility, as demonstrated by the results of the previously cited ETF/CRRC report, the risk of engaging in movement outside institutional structures is increased; mobility avenues which have substantial risks given the absence of practical support and advice. There are also social inequality consequences, since only those with sufficiently high levels of social and economic capital can successfully initiate and sustain mobile careers. Therefore this situation, of reliance on non-institutional mobility, ultimately generates risk of brain drain due to a lack of control among qualified youth cohorts.

### **Armenian student perspectives on moving to the EU**

These general reflections brings us to consider what mobility means for students in Armenia, particularly in terms of their own educational and career development; for example, what are their feelings about moving to the EU for short or long duration study opportunities?



In looking for answers, it should be said that the amount of dedicated research on this topic is limited: European youth sociology has for the most ignored Armenian young people, and even when studied, they are lumped into the catch-all ‘post-socialist’ category or classified according to Western socio-demographic norms (Roberts and Pollock, 1999). In this sense, just as we need an internationalisation of ‘international student mobility’, we also need to move towards a more inclusively European view of European youth: that is, not just focusing on the small cluster of youth cohorts within EU member state countries.

To open up discussion this issue, we draw upon perspectives gathered from students from various universities in Yerevan. As an initial platform our workshop provided an opportunity to discuss their hopes of moving to the EU for study, including the possibility of participating in Erasmus+, in addition to asking practical questions about engaging in other forms of mobility. From the point of view of the convenors, the extent to which certain students had already made plans was striking, with destinations chosen due to their links with existing academic trajectories; that is, elite universities specialising in a specific Masters degree or a PhD programme. As a means of further exploring the level of prior mobility experience and plans for the future of Armenian students, we conducted a web-survey, aimed at our workshop participants and others who had registered an interest in attending but were not able to do so. Distributed via social media, we managed to gather 50 cases, which illustrate some key aspects of mobility planning.

Almost half of those responding had prior experience of studying abroad: 22 per cent completed a degree course at a foreign university, 11 per cent a short-term exchange facilitated by their institution and 11 per cent other forms of mobility that they had personally arranged. Most of these exchanges took place within Europe: 30 per cent in the EU and 2 per cent in a non-EU European country; 12 per cent had also studied in North America. In regard to the impact of these stays abroad, 31 per cent stated that they had experienced personal development, 29 per cent felt that they had strengthened their educational profile, 29 per cent learnt how to live in another country and 27 per cent improved their chances of finding a job. These initial findings provide us with a reminder that there is a high degree of mobility capacity among Armenian students, more so than was the case in previous studies with respondents from similar educational backgrounds elsewhere in Europe (e.g. Cairns, 2014, 2015b). It is also striking to observe similarities with what might be termed EU mobility norms considering the high prominence of personal and educational development issues alongside career concerns. Looking towards the future, 18 per cent wanted to spend time at a

foreign university during their present course of study while 62 per cent wished to study abroad after the completion of their present course. This suggests that there is a strong preference for what we referred to previously as post-diploma level mobility, as opposed to credit mobility, although in mediation we should state that this result may also reflect the large proportion of students nearing the end of their present course of study within the sample. The desire to study abroad was linked to a large range of factors, the most prominent being the perception of a higher quality of education at foreign universities (63%) and better study opportunities abroad (58%), improving one's chances of finding a job (60%), and thinking that studying abroad would be an enjoyable cultural experience (47%).

While it is interesting to note preferences in terms of study options, we do need to take into account the likelihood of such plans coming to fruition. In identifying barriers, economic considerations were dominant, with 87 per cent of respondents feeling that the financial cost of leaving would stop them from doing so; leaving behind friends or family was a distant second place, cited by 11 per cent. Preferred destinations were predominantly in Europe (83% favouring an EU country and 15% a non-EU European country) and North America (47%) but not Russia (2%), with staying abroad for between one and three years the most popular anticipated duration (54%). Finally, looking towards the more distant future, 55 per cent also indicated that they would like to work in an EU country, 12 per cent a non-EU European country and 27 per cent in North America, the main motivations being a better quality of life (65%), higher salaries (53%) and personal fulfilment (45%).

### **Student mobility case studies**

To obtain a better idea as to the hopes and expectations of these students, we circulated several follow-up open questions after the workshop. In total, 11 students responded to our request to provide answers, out of which we have selected the following two cases to illustrate the main structures of feeling in regard to student mobility. While these cases are not intended to be representative, they do illustrate some of the main challenges facing Armenian students and graduates wishing to become mobile within their educational and career trajectories.

*Milena*

The first case we wish to illustrate concerns the mobility aspirations of Milena, a 19 year old second year International Relations student at Yerevan State University.<sup>9</sup> Given her choice of subject, Milena is of the opinion that foreign study experience would be extremely valuable for her career. In this sense, she is someone for whom having a mobility capacity is not only valuable but arguably a necessity. However, Milena has concerns about the cost of moving, and states that she would be in need of a scholarship.

I am a future diplomat, and I would like to know where I can work besides the diplomatic corps as in Armenia as it is very, very difficult to get a job in the diplomatic corps if you don't have, let say, a 'good relative'. But I am very purposeful person. I do my best to study well and reach my dreams.

Milena also states that she is open to the idea of participating in an Erasmus+ programme, with the above quotation highlighting one reason why mobility programmes are advantageous: the perceived egalitarian nature of access, with placements not being dependent on patronage networks.

In her other answers, Milena illustrates some of the other difficulties in following her chosen career path, with finding good mobility opportunities difficult due to the scarcity of accurate information as well as the issue of fixed deadlines for applications, which become easy to miss when not well publicised. As she explains in her own words:

I always have dreamt about moving and studying abroad. I would like to take part in student exchange programmes. [...] I do want to take part in Erasmus but my university now hasn't any new agreement with Erasmus. The two programmes aren't working any more (Ember and Yanus), and I didn't participate as I knew about Erasmus only lately. But several of my friends applied. The deadline was over so I can't take part, but I hope I will have an opportunity to take part in other exchange programmes.

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<sup>9</sup> All names have been changed to protect respondent anonymity.

Looking at the issue of potential destinations, Milena has a very broad view, ‘dreaming about a good education in another country’ and ‘wanting to know about another countries’ culture people and life.’ But at the same time, she wants to be a good representative of Armenia and her family. Moving abroad to study is perceived as being potentially beneficial in terms of knowledge and skills for herself, Armenia and her destination country: ‘I think it is important for both two countries to improve the level of education and have good and experienced specialists’. In this sense, we can see that Milena’s views on mobility are broadly consistent with EU values, in emphasising the circulatory principle and the need to re-deploy academic capital upon return, and do not endorse the idea of brain drain.

### *Elen*

For postgraduate students, mobility is also important although potentially more challenging to access given the narrower range of opportunities on offer compared to making the transition from secondary education to an undergraduate degree programme; and the further one ascends the educational ladder, the more competitive access to opportunities becomes due to their increasing scarcity. This scenario is illustrated by Elen, a 22 year old Sociology student at Yerevan State University. She is in the second year of a Masters programme, and would like to study in Germany in the future, so is currently looking at courses in the English language there. Her preference is to move abroad for a fixed period as part of an exchange programme such as an EC funded Erasmus Mundus degree, which would involve several consecutive years spend abroad at universities in different countries:

As I already mentioned, a preferred destination is Germany because I have study experience in Berlin and it had a great impact on my development, so I would like to continue my education in Germany. But in fact, the country is not as important as the existence of a good programme in social sciences at the university.

This perspective is interesting in that Elen is illustrating the value of previous foreign study experience as an orientation point for subsequent movement. In this sense, she demonstrates the incremental nature of the student and graduate mobility trajectory, with one

move often followed by another. It is also notable that it is not the choice of country that matters most but rather the quality of the education on offer.

In regard to potential benefits of moving to another country, Elen cited international experience, innovative study technologies and further career opportunities as the most prominent encouragement factors. This underlines the seriousness of her intent although in respect to perceived difficulties, and as with Milena, financial issues were prominent as a potential deterrent, as was being far from family and living in a new atmosphere. In this sense, we can deduce that there is a balancing of the professional benefits against the personal costs taking place within the mobility decision-making process.

## **Discussion**

Given the status of our research as a work-in-progress, we will not be drawing conclusions about student mobility from Armenia to the EU in this paper. We can however highlight the fact that a significant knowledge gap exists within the international student mobility research field, with corresponding theoretical shortcomings in the discursive representation of the geographical circulation of tertiary educated young people that serves to under-represent those from non-EU contexts and under-represent postgraduate movers. In this sense, we hope to contribute to the correcting of this imbalance through illustrating some of our preliminary findings. And from our own point of view, we are able to identify themes for further exploration in subsequent fieldwork. This includes investigation into different mobility modalities, ranging from credit mobility exchanges during an undergraduate programme to more or less permanent migration, taking in account a range of potential drivers and inhibitors of outward movement relating to personal and professional considerations as opposed to assuming that all moves are motivated only by financial imperatives.

In opening-up this research field, the results of our web survey provide an initial indication of the level of interest in moving abroad, both during one's present course of study and after; in this sense, we can confirm the popularity of credit mobility as well as the even greater popularity of moving abroad for postgraduate study. In regard to where our respondents wish to go, the EU predominates, and the examples of Milena and Elen provide us with some ideas as to why this is the case: relating to perceived 'European' values and openness within educational structures, as well as quality of life issues. We can therefore see

that in general, there is consistency with what we might term the EU ideal of movement as circulatory and value-laden, but also with a high degree of concern with the financial and emotional costs involved in a move abroad.

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