

Encounter with the unknown

- a study on the motivations and experiences of mobility students

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Biography

From 2010 to 2013, Mette Ernlund conducted some research into international student mobility in higher education. On this basis, she wrote and submitted a thesis (PhD) to the “University of Southern Denmark” on 28th May 2014. The research focuses more specifically on the motivations and experiences of students who go abroad during their studies. This scientific work thus constitutes the basis of this article. Today, Mette Ernlund is in charge of communication at the “University College South Denmark” R&D department.

Abstract

In recent decades, international mobility in higher education has become a political and institutional concern. The Bologna Process, initiated in 1999, definitively triggered cooperation between European universities, thus promoting exchanges through the construction of a European Higher Education Area. One of the objectives is to reach 20% of mobility by 2020. The research forming this article is based on narrative interviews, and aims to take stock of current mobility solely from a qualitative point of view. It therefore distinguishes itself from the dominant quantitative approach in European and global political discourse, where mobility, its democratisation and success are more often measured in numbers. The survey was conducted in four European countries and its results reveal a real need to better understand the profiles of students who choose mobility. With this we can fully understand their motivations and experiences linked to their time abroad and thus, amongst other things, provide appropriate support before, during and after mobility.

1. Introduction

At international level, and for some decades in the higher education sector, the political and institutional ambition has revolved around strengthening university cooperation. This internationalisation of education is a direct consequence of globalisation, allowing, in particular, for a greater flow of people, knowledge and institutions across borders. The internationalisation of education is particularly reflected by increased mobility of students, professors/researchers and institutions¹.

In Europe, strategies have been put in place to strengthen university exchanges within European institutions, giving rise to the Bologna Process initiative in 1999 (Bologna Process, 2009). The Bologna Declaration has now been signed by 47 member states and allows, amongst other things, many students to experience a period abroad during their studies, in particular thanks to the implementation of a three-cycle structure (Bachelor, Master’s, PhD) and a common credit system (ECTS).

¹ According to the OECD (2009, p. 332), international student mobility is defined as “students who go to a country other than their country of residence or previous schooling for the specific purpose of pursuing studies”.

With the aim of measuring the extent and evolution of this mobility and therefore the success of the strategies put in place, politicians and institutions most often analyse student data in a quantitative way (Ernlund, 2014). This approach can effectively provide important information on the volume of mobility and related topics from a general point of view. On the other hand, such a way of working does not allow us to look more closely at the individual, for a deeper understanding, to analyse their motivations and experiences, so as to understand their true feelings. The current political debate promotes economic interest where the democratisation of mobility is believed to create more international future employees. As for them, they will then be expected to contribute to a strong, economic and competitive development of the increasingly globalised labour market (ibid.). It is indeed possible that increased mobility leads to such development, which additional surveys might perhaps clarify. However, the dialogue with students is relevant and perhaps essential. Not only when we try to understand the impact and effects of mobility objectives and strategies established for students, but also with regard to institutions or even the labour market.

The article in question therefore focuses on the many conditions and phenomena linked to international student mobility in bachelor programmes, giving voice to them. In this way, the students' voices are at the heart of the survey with the aim of, on the one hand, shedding light on their different motivations to go abroad and, on the other, finding out about their experiences abroad.

The following chapters firstly present the methodological approach and the theoretical framework on which this research is based. Then the international context of mobility is introduced, followed by a presentation of the main results of the survey. The final chapter presents the conclusion as well as a discussion on the new understanding of mobility students profiles.

2. Methodology and theoretical framework of the survey

The survey is built around the encounters of foreign students with the Nordic culture, represented by Denmark and Norway, as well as the French culture, represented by Belgium and France. Thirty-eight narrative interviews build this survey and reveal the diversity of students' remarks. The narrative method (Horsdal, 2009 & Bruner, 2009) puts emphasis on the narrative as a social action through which the narrator builds their universe. Humans are surrounded by relationships and these interactions are of paramount importance to the narrative they build at certain moments in their life. Therefore, the story must be interpreted in relation to its historical, social and cultural context to understand the actions that the person in question takes to make sense of their life (Burr, 1995/2003 & Gergen, 1999/2010).

The contact with the thirty-eight participating students was established by the international relations officers of the selected universities and each interview lasted between thirty minutes to two hours. The students came from sixteen countries². The interviews were recorded and transcribed in advance of an in-depth narrative analysis based on the Horsdal analysis method (2009).

The hermeneutical discipline (Gadamer, 1960/2007) is present at all stages of this research and gives, through interpretations and thanks to strong theoretical support, a better understanding of what motivates students to go abroad as well as their multiple personal and professional experiences recounted during the interviews. Although this methodological approach can sometimes be called into question due to a lack of reliability as it does not allow for an exact reproduction of the obtained

² Finland, Germany, France, Poland, Switzerland, Belgium, Canada, the United States, China, Turkey, Spain, Portugal, Czech Republic, Sweden, the Netherlands and England.

results and a number of these are removed from their context, it is nevertheless very useful to discover the nuances and details of each story. These areas of interest are the very legitimacy of the survey conducted.

Similarly, the theoretical framework chosen to clarify the various narratives is mainly based on the subjective aspects of each student. At first, Weber's theory (1904/2003 & 1921/2003) on the ideal type makes it possible to classify the thirty-eight students met into four main profiles: Adventurer, Knowledge-Seeker, Escapee and Cautious Academic. The figure of ideal types is shown below and will be explained in more detail in Chapter 4 of this article when the main results of the survey are presented.

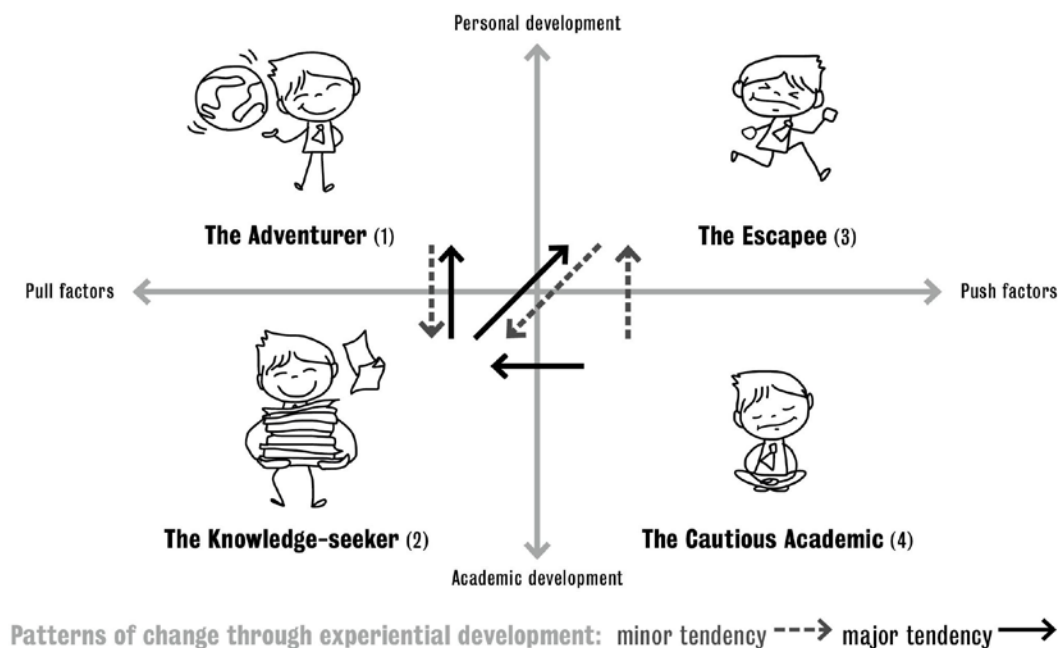


Figure 1: The four ideal types

From the four ideals and taking as a starting point theories on youth, culture, learning and narrative³, I conducted a qualitative study on students belonging to each ideal type. This brings to light how the four profiles differentiate and evolve during mobility.

3. International mobility context

Before presenting the results of the survey, looking at the existing literature on mobility on an international scale reveals the quantitative policy objectives dominating the institutional discourse. OECD (2009) and UNESCO (2009) rely on transnational statistics in their assessment of international mobility. Over a period of seventeen years, from 1990 to 2007, global mobility has evolved from 1.1 million to 3 million students in higher education. However, the mobility rate is about 2% of the total number of students enrolled. From a global point of view, this means that a minority benefits from mobility despite the potential change since 2007. What must nonetheless be taken into account about the analysed data coming from OECD and UNESCO is the fact that these institutions do not include

³ See Hofstede & Hofstede (1991/2006), Horsdal (2009), Illeris (2012), Illeris et al. (2002 & 2009), Jørgensen (1999/2010), Murphy-Lejeune (2002), Rosenthal (2006), Simmel (1908/1999), Simonsen (2003/2012), Wenger (1998), Wiedemann & Zeuner (2012), Ziehe (1989/2002 & 2004/2007).

mobility periods of less than twelve months. This then leaves a doubt about the true mobility in the world and places a question mark over the duration criteria taken by the statistics.

For several decades, mobility has become an integral part of the economy of higher education institutions. This is an increasingly competitive education market, which allowed in 2007 *The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education* in London to list countries according to their ability to attract mobility students (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). We see that Europe is well represented with powerful countries like England, Germany and France:

- *The Major Players*: États-Unis, Angleterre, Australie.
- *The Middle Powers*: Allemagne, France.
- *The Evolving Destinations*: Japon, Canada, Nouvelle-Zélande.
- *The Emerging Contenders*: Malaysia, Singapour, Chine.

At European level, the Ministers for Higher Education who signed the Bologna Agreements meet every two years to assess short and long-term objectives. During their meeting in Leuven in 2009, 10 years after the start of the process, the main focus was on strengthening *student-centred learning* and *lifelong learning*, better social engagement as well as the goal to reach 20% of mobility by 2020 (Bologna Process, 2009). It is easier to achieve this crucial objective of increasing mobility in some institutions compared to others depending on, amongst other things, the activities proposed, their popularity and their geographical position. Since 1987, a mobility programme such as ERASMUS has facilitated university cooperation in Europe on an economic level and ensures the quality of exchanges; institutions possess *The Erasmus University Charter* certification (European Commission, 2013). Other mobility programmes have also existed for a long time. Despite the new political initiative to group the various programmes under the name of ERASMUS+ from January 2014, the statistics referred to at the beginning of this chapter show that there is a long way to go to reach a global mobility rate of 20%.

4. Main results of the survey

The survey is divided into two parts: an analysis of the motivations of students going abroad and an analysis of their experiences abroad.

MOTIVATIONS

The first part of the analysis shows that several factors influence students' choice to go abroad, namely their culture, mobility capital and individual ambitions on a personal and professional level.

When we speak about culture, we are simultaneously speaking about the social conditions of young people and national cultural values. Social conditions are notably marked by the freedom of each individual to make and take responsibility for their own choices, through the search for meaning and self-development. Added to this are the demands and pressure that young people face daily to be successful in their lives. Thus, the lack of relationships and traditions (Ziehe, 2004/2007) upon which young people can rely may encourage them to look towards the unknown to discover, sometimes to escape and in all cases to develop. In addition, they clearly carry national cultural values, which in different ways also motivates them to leave home to gain new experiences. In this regard, a 21-year-old Chinese psychology student moved to Denmark to stay competitive in China's job market. She explains:

”There are so many people so we can’t just study what we like because we always have to compete with others, to struggle, to earn more money, to survive so ... it’s very hard and I think the students in China are very poor because they always study. Always study. (...) in China most of the students choose to go abroad and one important thing is to improve our English. (...) if you just want to see what it is like in another country and you don’t improve anything, I think it’s a waste”

Regarding mobility capital, the analysis shows that students who go abroad are part of an elite (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) having a certain intellectual, sentimental and social openness and often possessing ambitions and drive. Moreover, prior to moving abroad they often have an initial experience of adaptation in their country of origin, which initiates and facilitates this mobility experience. Previous mobility experience and family circumstances may also motivate a stay abroad, but to a lesser extent according to the interviews conducted.

The last element that has been analysed to better understand the reasons for students going abroad relates to the personal and professional ambitions of the four ideal types (Wiedemann & Zeuner, 2012). Students are not necessarily aware of the impact of the cultural aspect and mobility capital on their choice to leave while their desire for personal and professional development seems quite clear to everyone. Thus, the motivations of the students belonging to the four ideal types are shown in Figure 2 below:

| Adventurer | Knowledge-Seeker | Escapee | Cautious Academic |
|---|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Desire for a change of air | Career – CV | Identity – self-development | Professional knowledge development |
| Social network development | Language and cultural awareness | Fresh start – search for meaning | Intercultural knowledge |
| In search of freedom and responsibility | | | |

Figure 2: Themes/motivations for going abroad analysed using Wiedemann & Zeuner’s motivation model, 2012

EXPERIENCES

The narrative analysis (Horsdal, 2009 & Bruner, 2009) on student mobility experiences first shows that there is consistency between the existential values of student profiles and their experiences. Profiles and stories are linked as follows:

- Students belonging to the ideal type "Adventurer" tell stories of adventures
- Students belonging to the ideal type "Knowledge-Seeker" tell stories of evolution
- Students belonging to the ideal type "Escapee" tell stories of suffering
- Students belonging to the ideal type "Cautious Academic" tell stories of anti-heroes

It then appears that for certain students an evolution of initial experiences takes place, during their time abroad, see arrows in figure 3 below. In this way, we notice a movement of "Knowledge-Seeker" students towards a more personal evolution and of "Cautious Academic" students towards a much more career-oriented evolution than initially expressed. The increased courage and self-esteem developed during periods abroad allows them to gradually open up to other backgrounds. The "Adventurer" and "Escapee" students remain for the most part in their initial field of experience throughout their time abroad. Although, this seems to be a voluntary choice among the former who

are satisfied with their adventurous experiences, the latter allow themselves instead to lead by their state of suffering and consequently focus on developing their identity.

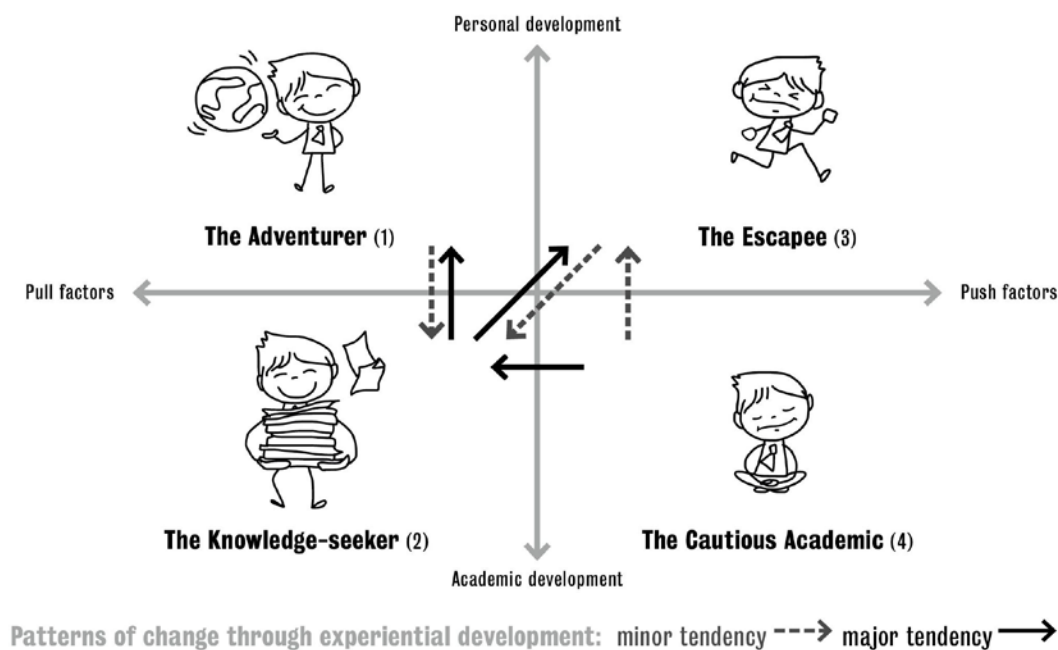


Figure 3: Evolution of experiences. Discontinuous lines represent a weak trend, continuous lines represent a strong trend

The social aspect is a common theme seen in all ideal types. However, a difference can be seen in how students perceive this phenomenon depending on their social and psychological conditions. Thereby, the most self-confident students belonging to the ideal types "Adventurer" and "Knowledge-Seeker" are seeking new relationships in the multiple cultures they encounter. Those students characterised by a lack of self-confidence belonging to the ideal types "Escapee" and "Cautious Academic" instead seek to understand the social universe and the world they live in. Regardless, mobility seems universally beneficial if the situation is positive and provides necessary support.

During mobility, the students all move towards more or less defined self-development. We see them develop through their involvement in different communities (Wenger, 1998), or conversely, in disapproving of these communities they reaffirm their identity. In all cases, accessible communities, whether social, professional, family or other communities, seem to help them work on themselves. Similarly, students belonging to the "Adventurer" ideal type generally seek communities with a strong social notion allowing personal development through new adventures and human relationships. Those belonging to the "Knowledge-Seeker" ideal type are mostly in search of communities that support professional development. For example, communities centred around work experience. However, they are also involved in more social communities. Within students belonging to the "Escapee" ideal type, we notice a distancing from existing communities from their home countries, where they no longer feel comfortable. These students are seeking new opportunities that allow them to focus on building their identity. Finally, due to their lack of confidence and courage students belonging to the "Cautious Academic" ideal type are in search of more family-orientated communities that can support them on a daily basis during mobility. These communities form around

their homes and give them a sense of belonging, security and support that is essential for their well-being.

Today's youth is constantly searching for meaning, and mobility students all seem to find something during their stay. Some discover the meaning of life through their own experiences, which contribute to their self-development. Others seek this meaning as ambassadors on their return where they wish to convey what they have experienced and learnt to their compatriots. Mobility students show a considerable difference in their strengths and weaknesses. Despite this heterogeneity, they all seem to develop international skills, which will subsequently enable them to act in a much broader context than their national context. However, it should be noted that these skills are not automatic and can only be developed if students engage in the foreign environment (Ackers, 2010). This is the case for the students in this survey.

The last results to present concern national, cultural values, which are naturally embedded in students' minds (Hofstede & Hofstede, 1991/2006). Thus, we see that these values have an affect on their experience abroad in a fairly important way, especially when there is a considerable difference between original values and foreign values. Generally, encountering a liberal and egalitarian culture like Denmark and Norway seems to result in more positive experiences than encountering a more authoritarian and conservative culture like France and French-speaking Belgium. However, frustrations may be associated with both types of encounters, which students deal with differently depending on their ideal type. Following this notion, students belonging to the "Adventurer" and "Knowledge-Seeker" ideal types seem to use their courage and strength to cope with potential frustrations, driven by their desire to discover and ambition to learn. Students belonging to the "Escapee" and "Cautious Academic" ideal types have little say in how they deal with such cultural frustrations. They focus on themselves in order to develop and succeed in mobility. This ultimately allows everyone to put into perspective their cultural values and therefore to reflect on how these values influence their behaviour and actions.

The figure below (Figure 4) visualises the coherence of aspects that can influence students' mobility process before, during and after. The decision to go abroad is found in the centre of the figure as this triggers the personal and professional development of the student. Ahead of making the decision various motivations exist that shape the four ideal types and, as a result, influence the initial mobility experiences. After making the decision many experiences unfold as a result of encountering the unknown. The figure does not take into account the characteristics of each ideal type, nor the way in which students evolve more specifically during their stay (see Figure 3). Over the course of the stay we see self-development taking shape, which can lead to the development of international skills if the student shows commitment.

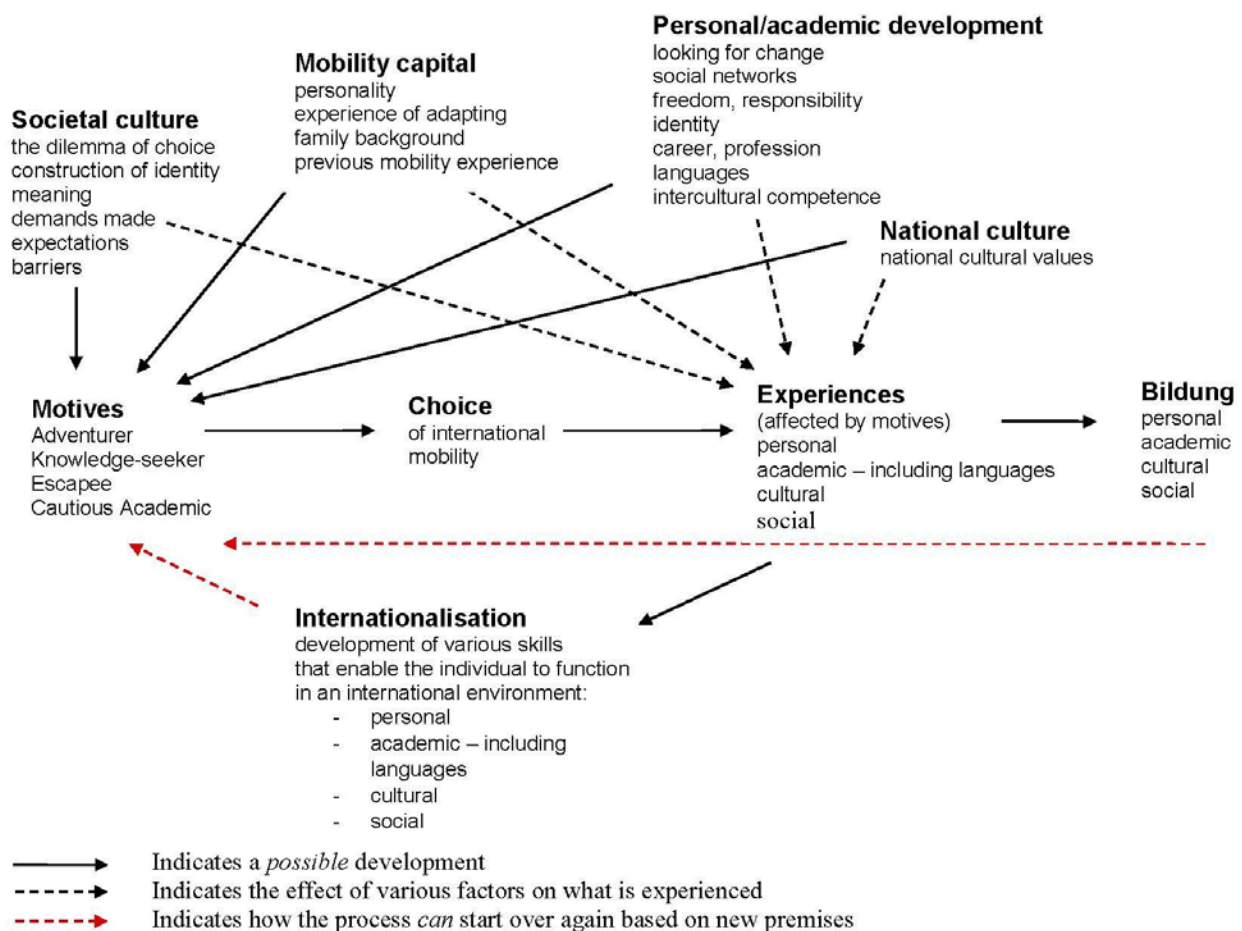


Figure 4: The mobility process

5. Conclusion and discussion

The survey has produced a new understanding of mobility students. What is important to remember is the considerable dissimilarity of their profiles and consequently the different types of experiences they seek abroad. If institutions today have every interest in taking this knowledge into account in their international strategy, it is precisely because of the needs as well as the very varied and distinct expectations of the students. Appropriate support before, during and after mobility, with the aim of ensuring success seems beneficial for not only institutions but also for students.

Similarly, a question around the political ambitions to democratise mobility seems fair. The major objective of reaching 20% mobility by 2020 within higher education can certainly be achieved, but not without considering the consequences. Therefore, it seems necessary for institutions to not only be ready to send and welcome students belonging to the ideal profile type "Knowledge-Seeker", most frequently found in mobility and fairly easy to support and satisfy, but also to take into account the other three ideal types. Increased or even compulsory mobility will increase the number of students with a more cautious profile, which will require institutions to invest even more in personalised support. Some institutions already meet the 20% mobility criteria. Others will also achieve this in the years to come. Others will never succeed. However, for those who do not invest in the necessary resources for needs analysis and good support, increased mobility may not be successful. This will be expressed by the lack of engagement of students in foreign culture, by bad experiences and too

much frustration, by a lack of development of international skills, etc. In these cases, we can question whether it is better for institutions to strengthen their *internationalisation at home*⁴ in addition to less mobility, or so that they target the 20% of mobility at risk of not being able to identify and support the different profiles. These questions only become logical when we think about the qualitative aspects of mobility.

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⁴ These are, in general, strategies put in place to integrate the international dimension into the local educational environment: Attracting foreign students and teachers, bringing in foreign speakers, etc. (Altbach & al., 2009).

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