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# **Erasmus + (key action 1) mobility of students in distance learning programs. Empirical analysis based on the example of International Business School - Botevgrad, Bulgaria**

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**Annotation:** Digitization of education and implementation of online learning platforms are changing not only the way in which knowledge is provided from the universities but also the profile of students. In this respect, distance learning is preferred by individuals who, for one reason or another, are unable to physically attend lectures. A priority objective of the paper is to determine the willingness of distance learning students from International Business School - Botevgrad (Bulgaria) to apply for a mobility of a minimum 3 months study period under the Erasmus + program (KA1). Primary data is collected on the basis of in-depth interviews (n = 15). As a main conclusion of the data analyses, it can be stated that the participation of students in Erasmus + (KA1) study mobility, for at least 3 months period of time, is perceived as "difficult to be achieved" by the respondents participating in the survey. The present research paper helps to better understand the extent to which distance learning students are motivated to participate in mobility.

**Key words:** mobility, distance learning, in-depth interviews, Erasmus +.

## **1. Introduction**

Education is a fundamental factor for economic progress and growth through building of competitive human capital. However, it can be argued that diversity and large amounts of data, especially online, are the cause of difficulties when perception and reproduction of information by human mind. This in hand is a prerequisite for traditional methods of learning to lose their efficacy. In this respect, main focus of the high education institutions is "how" to pass on the relevant knowledge to the student by the use of the most effective method, while enhancing the quality of the learning process. In order to overcome the mentioned issue of qualitatively transferring the knowledge from the lecturer to the student often are used education instruments and techniques that are based on the idea of digitization of the learning process and the introduction of information communication technologies (ICT). The problems and opportunities of using ICT as well as interactive educational techniques based on the digitization of the study content are subjects of discussion by many specialists in the field (Gocić, M. и J. Mijović, 2016, p.39; Borisova, L. 2016, p.76-71; Tsvetan, I., 2016, p. 104-105, Tudor, C., M. Gheorghe, M.

Oancea, R. Sova, 2013; Georgieva, T., 2011; Battalio, J. 2009). Although the scientific discussions on this topic are still on the table, the worldwide technological development is a reason to claim that the use of digital training techniques will become from a competitive advantage of higher education institutions to a mandatory element of the learning process. Because of that the introduction of digital educational resources and instruments is among the priorities of the European Commission (European commission, 2018). The Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Bulgaria, as an EU Member State, also supports the idea of digitization of education as a motivation and an opportunity which will help school students to acquire competencies (<https://www.mon.bg/bg/news/2798>). The use of "interactive" methods and digital techniques in Bulgarian schools has a direct impact on the learning process in higher education institutions. In this respect, students who have studied by the use of online interactive methods will not only expect a similar style of education from higher education institutions, but will also look for educational institutions that offer such kind of digital solutions.

A European Union's priority is also to motivate student mobility, through which an exchange of knowledge and creation of competitive advantages will be achieved. At EU level by 2020, a part of the education for at least 20% of graduated students should have been spent abroad (Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2009). According to OECD data, there is a positive trend all over the world towards increasing the number of student mobility during the period 2013-2016. However, in 2016, the percentage of foreign students is below 10% compared to the total number of students trained in EU Member States (OECD, 2018, p. 219-225). Regarding Bulgaria, in 2017, the percentage of students who participated in a mobility abroad with a view to acquire study results (credits) is 1.5% (Monitoring education and training 2018, Bulgaria). In terms of Erasmus + KA 1 "Higher Education", during the academic 2016/2017 year compared to the academic 2013/2014 year, there is a significant increase by 708 of the number of student's mobility. However, there is a decrease in mobility for learning at the expense of mobility for practice (The Erasmus + Annual Report 2017, 2019). Based on the above a link between the digitization of the learning process and the mobility of students, should be sought. A more in deep study of student attitudes at higher education institutions, who are using digital educational platforms and instruments, will help to better understand student motivation in applying for Erasmus + (KA1) mobility.

The aim of the present paper is to study the opinion of students enrolled in distance learning programs about their willingness to participate in a mobility during their study period. In a more narrow aspect mobility under the Erasmus+ program (KA1) for minimum 3 months study period is taken into consideration. In order to achieve the author's goal, the following research tasks are defined:

- To outline some of the positive and negative aspects of distance learning form of education for the purposes of applying and participating in student mobility for studies in another country.

- To collect opinions of students enrolled in distance learning programs regarding their motives when choosing whether to apply for at least 3 months mobility for studies.

The object of the study are students from the Bachelor programs of International Business School - Botevgrad (IBS), Bulgaria, enrolled in distance learning form of education. The choice of the high educational institution is based on the fact that IBS is one of the first private higher education school that provides distance learning in Bulgaria. Currently about 68% of all students in IBS are enrolled at distance learning programs of education. The choice of the target group is consistent with the goal set by the author - the students under review to study their lessons online, which in hand could be considered as a positive prerequisite for the students to have enough time and opportunity to apply for a mobility during their education. In addition, the target group includes only students from Bachelor's programs because of reported increase of Bachelor's students at European level who apply for mobility compared to the number of students from Master's programs (OECD, 2018, p. 218, 222). The subject of the study are in-deep interviews with representatives of the target group. The choice of such primary data collection tools is based on the possibility of gathering more detailed, reliable and diverse data during the interview process.

The main hypothesis that advocates the author is that student mobility in another country is of interest to distance learning students from IBS insofar as it may be linked to their ongoing work commitments or provide flexible opportunities to combine their work tasks with the mobility.

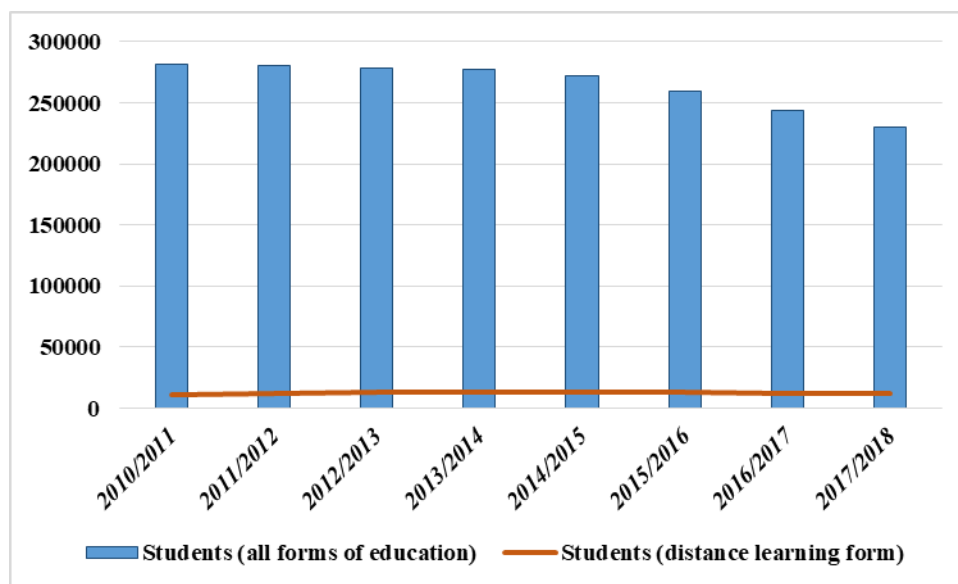
## **2. Literature review and discussions**

In general, distance learning is a process of acquiring knowledge in a situation where the student is not physically available in the learning environment (teaching room). Distance learning often includes a set of different learning techniques and instruments provided through information and communication systems and technologies. Student's motivation for choosing such a form of learning depends on many heterogeneous and subjective factors. For this reason, some of the students think that the acquisition of knowledge in a specific field is important, while for other students - the pure form of curiosity about the distance learning education is a motive for enrolment in such courses (Zhenghao, C. et al., 2015). Researches in the field indicates that a priority factor for selecting online courses is the professional development of the current job position rather than to achieve "purely educational goals" (OECD, 2016, p.107).

According to the National Statistical Institute (NSI), the number of students in higher education institutions in Bulgaria during the academic 2017/2018 year is approximately 18% less than during the academic 2010/2011 year (see figure 1). Such data could be explained with the negative demographic changes that occurs in recent years. In particular, a negative natural growth

is recorded in 2017<sup>1</sup> (Eurostat, Population and population change statistics, 2019), which is considered as a major factor that affects the demographic processes in our country (Eurostat, Contribution of natural change and net migration, 2017). Migration, and especially the number of people emigrated from the Republic of Bulgaria, is an additional factor affecting the number of students enrolling in higher education institutions. In this respect, in our country a negative mechanical growth for the indicator "external migration<sup>2</sup>" is reported in 2017 (- 5989) ([https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/result.jsf?x\\_2=120](https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/result.jsf?x_2=120)). As a result the number of both current and potential students in institutions which offers higher education services has decreased. In addition, the predictions of the National Statistical Institute are that in 2070 the population of Bulgaria will decrease by approximately 23% compared to 2015<sup>3</sup>. Despite the reported negative data of the decreasing number of students in the higher education institutions, the number of students in distance learning form is kept in a relatively constant level (see figure 1).

**Figure 1. Students in distance learning form of education in Bulgaria compared to all students, number, academic year**



Source: NSI, 2019, [https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/result.jsf?x\\_2=840](https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/result.jsf?x_2=840), last access on 04.02.2019

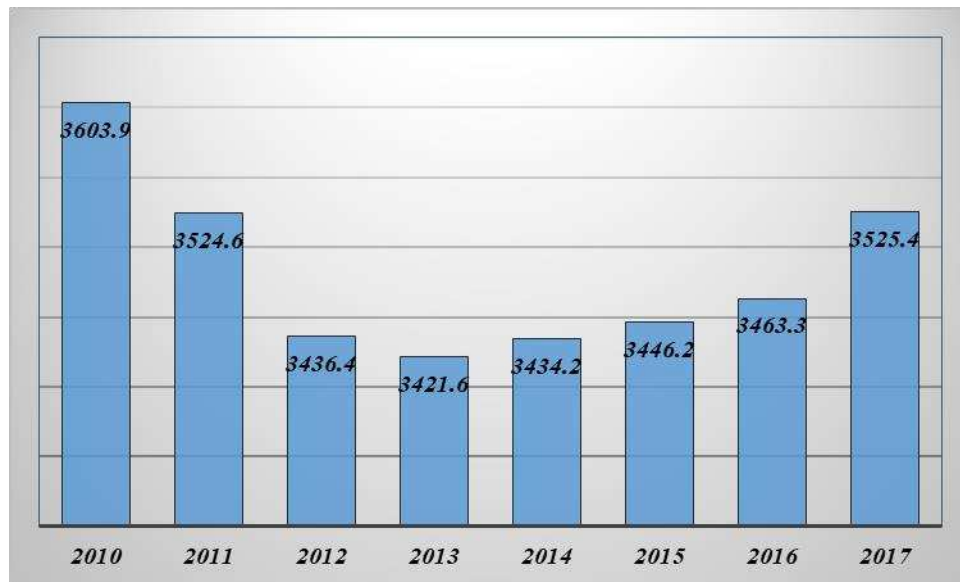
<sup>1</sup> -6.5 per 1 000 people.

<sup>2</sup> The indicator includes only the people who have declared to the administrative authorities in Bulgaria that they have changed their current address to a country abroad.

<sup>3</sup> The forecast is for population of Bulgaria by gender and age, II Option (Relative Acceleration) - NSI, 2017.

An object of analysis in the paper is also the number of employed people in Bulgaria as a factor influencing people to apply at higher education institutions. According to the data provided by NSI, regarding the indicator under review, a sharp fall in the number of people employed in 2013 compared to 2010 is reported. However, for the last four years (from 2014 to 2017 inclusive), there is a positive trend towards an increase in the number of people on the labor market. It is noteworthy that there is an increase of the number of employees (including self-employed) by nearly 60,000 (2%) in 2017 compared to the previous year – 2016.

**Figure 2. Employed people in Bulgaria, thousands, 2010 -2017**



Source: NSI, 2019, [https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/result.jsf?x\\_2=181](https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/result.jsf?x_2=181), last access on 04.02.2019

Such data could also be interpreted as a prerequisite for long-term quantitative reduction of the students in the educational institutions at the expense of increasing number of employees. Such an issue determines the necessity of changes in the strategic goals of the organizations that provides educational services. In particular, part of the priority objectives and tasks of higher education institutions should be directed towards preserving market positions and implementing appropriate policies and practices, corresponding to the decreasing number of population, through enhancing the quality of the learning process. One of the mechanisms to achieve quality education is to provide individualization and differentiation of the learning process, through digitization of the lessons and the study program (Engels-Critidis, R., 2015, p.17; Kolishev, N., 2014; Radev, P. et al. 2007, p.509).

Based on the above, we can raise the following research question: is shifting the student focus from learning to finding and retaining a job position has a negative impact on the students' motivation to participate in Erasmus + (KA1) mobility in another country? To answer to this research question, a study of students' opinion is made by the author.

### **3. Methodology of the research**

For the purposes of this paper, the study is conducted on the basis of a in-deep interviews, face-to-face with representatives from the target group. The asked research questions aim at identifying the motives students to apply and participate in mobility, the possible mobility challenges as well as the positive and negative aspects of the chosen form of education (online learning) for the purposes of mobility participation. The time period of conducting the interviews covers the months from February 2019 to March 2019. The chosen period is in line with the academic calendar of the institution during which the students from distance learning courses have consulting hours at the building of IBS. It should be noted that for the purposes of distance learning programs IBS has chosen all study materials, as well as current and final exams, to be available only on an online platform. Students must use the platform to upload various materials, such as case studies and coursework, which must pass a plagiarism system before they are checked by the lecturer. Students have the opportunity to make consultations with lecturers through a personal face to face meeting and online – in real time via the platform.

A total of 15 respondents from 63 invited students take part in the survey. The average duration of the interviews is 10 minutes. Main limitations of the survey are the few number of respondents participating as well as the subjectivity of their answers. In this respect, the author of the current research does not claim for cause causal links, factor influences and interactions within society as a whole. However, the obtained primary data could be used as a basis for further research in the field for the purposes of enhancing the participation of distance learning students in mobility.

From a demographic and sociological point of a view, all interviewed students are currently living in Sofia, where the building for distance learning of IBS is positioned. About 53% of the respondents are women and about 67% are at the age group between 30 and 50 years old. Equivalent (67%) is the percentage of students who are married and have families.

Regarding the reasons of choosing distance learning, respondents unanimously express the view that online learning is a flexible option to get quality education during which they can combine it with other engagement and tasks. The lack of necessity for students to have full-time lectures is indicated as an advantage but also as a disadvantage. On one hand, respondents point out as an advantage the fact that they can enter the learning platform at any time and from anywhere and can read the study lessons and materials. This is, in essence, a major motivation for interviewees to enroll at such a form of training. On other hand, however, the majority of respondents indicate that the lack of direct and often contact with the lecturer may have a

disincentive effect in the sense that they should rely entirely on their ambitions and desire to study. The respondents state that "it is much easier to know that from 9 am to 1 pm you have lectures and you will only deal with this issue, and not to distract yourself because you are at home, for example, and it starts your favorite movie when you decide to study". However, the students share the view that they would not change their form of study from distance to full-time or part-time. As main reasons for this statement they point out the following:

- The need to take care for their family and especially for their children.
- The need to perform their work duties. It should be noted that about 87% of respondents work and about 13% are on maternity leave<sup>4</sup>. All interviewed students who have jobs are united around the view that the frequent absences from work due to the need to attend lectures is not tolerated by their employers.
- Existence of a previously obtained higher education degree. In this case, the respondents point out that they have already been "students, that's why they have an idea how and where to find the relevant information they need, but for the purposes of career development they need an additional higher education degree".
- Easy access to lecture materials, as well as the possibility of taking online exams. The foregoing is considered to be fundamental to those who frequently travel inside and outside the country.

When questioned whether students are aware of the opportunities to undertake student mobility under the Erasmus + program (KA1), 60% of them respond positively. They have learned about this opportunity from various information channels, such as the social networks supported by the IBS, distributed printed advertising materials, as well as from friends and acquaintances. The rest of the respondents (40%) state that "till now they have had no interest in student mobility and because of that they have never looked for any information". The issue regarding information saturation is also discussed with the interviewed students. In particular object under discussion is the negative impact of the large amount of news, data and information that students face on a daily basis online. It is noted that the information about the possibilities for mobility cannot always correctly and on time reach the end-user. It is so because in distance learning the focus of the student is to enter the specific training course and to perform the assigned by the lecturer tasks. Therefore, the student selectively notices any additional information that is not directly related to the learning process, no matter how "colored and flashy" it is shown. The collected data can be seen as an opportunity to improve online learning platforms through strategy of the correct identification and targeting with appropriate and timely information which can be more clearly seen from students by the use of interactive methods.

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<sup>4</sup> According to Bulgarian legislation, women have the right to leave due to pregnancy and childbirth at the rate of 410 days for each child. See: Labor Code, Prom. SG. Issue 26 from 1986, edited SG. No. 105 from 30 December 2016, Art. 163.



When asked whether the interviewed students would apply for Erasmus + (KA1) mobility the respondents unanimously state that they are willing but would most likely not take part in any. Previously, they explain with the long period during which they should be absent from the country. The students take into consideration the positive aspects of mobility in another education institution, but also take into account the fact that the reasons for choosing distance learning are the same as those because of which they would not apply and participate in mobility.

Main positive aspects which can motivate the respondents to apply for Erasmus + (KA1) study mobility are:

- Development and gaining of new professional and educational competencies.
- Personal and social development (building self-esteem, making new contacts and friendships, improving teamwork and communication skills, developing and improving skills to defend themselves in different environment).
- Collecting experience.
- Cultural exchange and building an European identity and self-esteem.
- Learning another language or improving current language skills.
- Respondents point out that, in the case of financial support, such as Erasmus + mobility grant it can be considered as a motivation for mobility, but it is not amongst the main reasons to apply.

A subject of discussions during the in-depth interviews is the respondents' attitude towards shortening the period of mobility as an opportunity to solve the problem of their long absence. Initially, respondents shared the view that such a solution is appropriate. Later on they state that the reduction of the mobility period would alter the primary goal and added value of the student going abroad to study. As a result it is proposed a combination of on-site lectures, which would be no more than two weeks, and online distance learning courses. In this case the online courses that are provided by the host institution have to enable real-time online consultations. In addition, courses should be designed in such a way that the student will be fully involved in the learning process despite his inability physically to attend lectures all the time. Such engagement may include, for example, joint projects with other distance learning students.

Based on the above it can be concluded that the motivations of the interviewed students not to participate in mobility abroad do not differ significantly from the reasons identified by the European Commission (Education and training monitor, 2018, p.80). In this respect, reluctance, funding or fear of intercultural differences are not prerequisite respondents not to participate in the program, but that they have to be absent from work.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The fact that around 87% of the students participating in the survey are currently working does not give us a reason to conclude that the majority of distance learning students work. However, it can be argued that by providing easily accessible, synthesized and interactive online educational information, distance learning is a preferred form of study, especially for working students, mothers with young children, disable people and those who do not have physical opportunity to attend lectures, but wish to receive quality education. Notwithstanding the subjective reasons that encourage individuals to choose online learning, the underlying motivation is for the student to have and use their time in a way that helps them to combine educational activities with other engagements and tasks. In this respect, Erasmus + (KA1) study mobility for at least 3 months is perceived as "difficult to be done" by the respondents participating in the research. Although the program allows for an interruption of the study period, it is not possible the student to be absent from the host institution all the time. Of course, there are other mechanisms that could be used to help distance learning students to achieve mobility even for not such a long period of absence. Participating in mobility in another educational institution for no more than a week or two, however, reduces the added value that student could receive if they participate in longer mobility, because their commitment to the host institution is greater.

The students' proposal within a semester to be combined on- line training with a short-stay on the spot seems to be an alternative to help people who do not have the possibility for longer mobility abroad. However, this raises another question - whether such a solution does not contradict the idea and the characteristics of "student mobility". In this respect, this is not a mobility we are talking about, rather a typical form of distance learning, but in another educational institution.

It can be argued that the profile of distance learning students implies to the possibility for them not to participate in Erasmus + (KA1) study mobility for a minimum of 3 months. This idea should not be perceived as a reason the distance learning students to be put in disadvantage situation compared to other full-time and part-time students regarding their participation in longer mobility. In the context of the fourth industrial revolution, digitalization in education is an inevitable process which, in addition to the development of the labor market in Bulgaria, are factors because of which distance learning will continue to be an attractive form of knowledge acquisition. This in turn requires of rethinking of how students who receive their online education can fully use the opportunities for participation in study mobility.

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