Policy Rationales for Student Mobility in the Nordic Countries: Balancing Egalitarianism and the Global Knowledge Economy?

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In the past 20 years, higher education dynamics worldwide have changed significantly. Globalisation, internationalisation, focus on the knowledge economy and competitiveness have become prominent concepts in national policy debates, and student mobility can be seen as one key expressions of such developments.

In the Nordic region, formalised began in the 1950s, first with the establishment of the Nordic Council and later through the Nordic Council of Ministers. The region has several regional agreements for cooperation in education and culture (including also a specific mobility scheme Nordplus that parallels Erasmus) and it is frequently described by a specific Nordic model. One can argue that the region has a well-established regional system for international student mobility – through historical linkages, support structures for the students, as well as a regional structure that manages this (the Nordic Council of Ministers, NCM). Despite this favourable condition for student mobility in the Nordic region, this mobility has been marked by changing patterns. While Nordic student mobility has always been characterised by uneven patterns (i.e. Icelandic students choosing Denmark or Finnish students choosing Sweden), recent decades also show new change patterns in Nordic student mobility – in particular in the number of Nordic students who choose Denmark as their main destination (Elken, Hovdhaugen, & Wiers-Jenssen, 2014). Moreover, while the region has traditionally emphasized cultural exchange and egalitarian values, the region has not been isolated from international trends towards emphasizing excellence and competition (Elken, Hovdhaugen, & Stensaker, 2016). *How do the Nordic countries manage these potentially competing policy rationales? Is there still something different about intra-Nordic mobility? To what extent have the global discourses of knowledge economy also entered discussions of student mobility in the Nordic region?*

The paper analyses how national priorities have changed over time in terms of student mobility over a period of about twenty years, by tracing how policies target Nordic students, and those considering student mobility and internationalisation more generally. Both degree mobility and exchange will be covered in the analysis. This policy framing of student mobility on national level is then contrasted with how Nordic student mobility is framed in the documents on regional level (NCM).

Analytically, the article puts particular focus on the notion of policy framing, the cognitive, normative and causal elements (Mampaey & Vukasovic, 2016) identified in policies. Policy

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framing takes its basic starting point from the argument that issues are not independent of actors, and that basic "problem" definition is an essential aspect of the outcomes that can be expected (Daviter, 2007). This means that observed issues are placed into a "context that gives them meaning", where policymakers apply their particular interpretative lens on how an issue is to be conceptualised (Zahariadis, 2003, p. 88). Problem definition for policies is thus not just a mere statement of facts, nor does it only take place in the agenda-setting phase – issues also become renegotiated in the policy process (Weiss, 1989). A frame then consists of specific information about the values and principles underpinning a specific preference, the goals of a policy, and the specific plans to achieve these goals (Zahariadis, 2003, p. 91). Newer research has summarised these various elements as the cognitive (this is what the issue is), normative (this is why it is important) and causal (this is how solutions will help to solve it) elements of the framing process (Mampaey & Vukasovic, 2016). Framing perspective can thus be relevant to identify potential shifts over time in the dominant frames in policy outputs.

Internationalisation and student mobility can be seen as a rather well-established theme in higher education policies in most countries. One can argue that rationales for international student mobility are closely related to rationales for internationalisation. A distinction is often made between four types of rationales for internationalisation: educational, cultural, economic and political (Knight, 2004; Van der Wende 1997; Wiers-Jenssen, 2014; Wit, 2002). These rationales are used as a categorisation for analysing policy framing of student mobility, of course with a sensitivtity towards hybrid categories or possible new emerging categories in the analysis.Of particular interest is the possible match or mismatch between policy frames identified on national level for Nordic and international student mobility, and between the different frames of the individual countries.

Methodologically, the study analyses policy outputs over a period between 1998-2018. This gives about a twenty year period. The rationale for this is that this would allow to identify priorities that pre-date the Bologna Process that is now widely considered as a key turning point for European coordination processes and emphasis on pan-European mobility. When relevant, key policy documents that were applicable at this time, but were introduced earlier are also reflected upon. The analysis on national level primarily focuses on key White Papers as these can be seen as key outputs for where priorities regarding internationalisation are defined in relation to other policy priorities. Furthermore, White and Green Papers specifically focused on internationalisation are examined and if such documents are published, as well as specific national strategy plans (e.g. for cooperation with specific regions/countries). Qualitative content analysis is employed with a structured coding scheme, where in the first round of analysis, documents are coded to identify the "problem" Nordic/general student mobility is addressing (and whether student mobility is a goal in itself or a solution to an identified problem), why the issue is considered relevant, and the specific policy instruments proposed. These are then used to explore the cognitive (what the problem is), normative (why is it a problem) and causal (link between problem and solution) framing aspects in these policy outputs regarding student mobility as such, and specifically Nordic student mobility.

This analysis will allow to identify shifts in policy framing over time, and whether there still is a specific Nordic approach to student mobility that emphasizes egalitarian values, or whether asumptions of Nordic cohesion are not only taken for granted but in fact an illusion. This will also allow for a critical discussion on the role student mobility has for higher education from a more general perspective.

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