

ASIAN STUDENT MOBILITY IN EUROPE: CHINESE AND VIETNAMESE STUDENTS STUDYING IN SWITZERLAND

In the last twenty years, higher education has undergone a number of significant changes. First, there has been a steady increase in the number of students enrolling at university, leading some scholars to define this phenomenon as the “massification” of higher education. Second, due to globalisation, higher education has become both more international and more competitive. The introduction of *quasi-markets* in the field of higher education also contributes to this situation. On the one hand, it is observed that year-on-year more students are studying abroad; American and European universities frequently represent the most desirable destinations for international students. On the one other, the competition among universities is increasing both in terms of research activities and funding, as well as the ability to attract the best students worldwide.

In this situation, national higher education systems are progressively becoming more active in the international scene: an increasing number of partnership agreements are signed every year between universities; new higher education cooperation networks are established worldwide; international curricula are developed; students and researchers are becoming more internationally mobile. As a result of its increasing proportions, student international mobility represents one of the most important challenges that higher education has to address. In fact, while the number of higher education students world-wide grew by 3.3% between 2008 and 2009, the number of students studying abroad increased by 6.4% during the same period. Furthermore, more than 3.500.000 students world-wide were enrolled outside their country of citizenship in 2010 (OCDE, 2011).

The university choice

In this context of high mobility, the main question is then to understand how Asian mobile students choose their universities abroad and, more precisely, decide to study in Switzerland. Besides classical economic and individual rational choices approaches, we assume that other factors such as the role of family plays a decisive role in making education choices (Ball,

2003; Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2001; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005; van Zanten, 2009), especially in Confucian oriented societies like China and Vietnam.

Family strategies and parental choices emerge as key determinants for both university choice and earning perspectives. Family strategies are to be considered as crucial because they express a wish to integrate the children in a stratified society. Other factors orientating family strategies are the social memberships (e.g. party membership, religion, etc.). This questions how families mobilize their social and cultural capital when choosing a Swiss university. The activation of social capital during the university choice leads future students to conceive it as a relation between the university, the parent's network and the work environment. What are the expected obligations in return?

Institutions characteristics are another exploratory explanation of the university choice. In both individual and family choices' strategies, the institutional environment has to be considered. The social composition and reputation of universities as well as the quality perception are undoubtedly determinants that have a certain weight in the university choice process.

The Swiss higher education system

In order to adjust to the aforementioned transformations and to address the challenges related to the development of an increasingly competitive higher education environment, Swiss universities have paid particular attention to the internationalisation of higher education, fostering its development especially in terms of student international mobility (Schenker-Wicki & Hürlimann, 2006).

In fact, Switzerland belongs to the five OECD countries which attract the highest number of international students in terms of tertiary education enrolment: international students account for 14.9% of total tertiary enrolments in Switzerland, and this percentage rises to 25.7% if only advanced research programs are taken into consideration (OCDE, 2011). In 2011/2012, 37'261 international students enrolled at a Swiss university, out of which 31'052 attended high school in a foreign country¹ (OFS, 2012).

¹ Because of the procedures to obtain the Swiss nationality, this distinction is crucial to precisely estimate the number of international mobile students.

Accounting for 39% of the total international mobile students in Switzerland (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012), Asian students represent the highest proportion of international mobile students studying at a Swiss university, besides international mobile students from European countries. Moreover, the number of international mobile students from Asia in Switzerland has constantly increased since 1999.

International mobile students from China and Vietnam

In the last 20 years, South-east Asia has experienced a remarkable socio-economic development and China and Vietnam, representing the two fastest growing economies in the region, have extensively participated in this trend. This significant development process has contributed to the emergence, for the very first time in the two aforementioned countries, of a middle-income urban class disposing of significant economic resources.

China and Vietnam can count on a long tradition of higher education and obtaining a university education represents an important achievement for both Chinese and Vietnamese families (Harman, Hayden, & Nghi Pham, 2010; Lee, 2006; Varghese, 2009). In fact, due to the economic growth and the emergence of an urban middle class with resources to finance higher education studies, the number of university students has steadily increased in Vietnam and China since the 1990s. As a result, the higher education system in China and Vietnam has progressively become more international and a significant number of Vietnamese and Chinese students leave their country every year to study abroad. According to the latest data available, in 2011, 562'477 Chinese students and 47'938 Vietnamese students left their country to study abroad (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). Moreover, the outbound mobility ratio for 2011 raised to 1.8 percent in China and 2.3 percent in Vietnam (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012).

Due to the significant increase in income of middle classes families, a growing number of wealthy Chinese and Vietnamese students are able to afford studying abroad without the State's financial support (scholarship). This represents a new phenomenon in China and Vietnam, which is particularly interesting to study given the fact that, in absolute numbers, Asian students account for more than 50% of all students studying abroad worldwide (OCDE, 2011).

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