

International student mobility to non-traditional destination countries: evidence from a host country

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Abstract

Since the early 1990s, Latvia has experienced high levels of emigration. Still, current dynamics show that net migration has nearly ceased and that a growing share of new immigrant populations are from non-European countries. One of the leading causes of a sizable share of recent immigration is the globalisation of higher education and the mobility of international students. However, in recent decades, international student mobility (ISM) has brought attention to various aspects of higher education, educational export, and migration trends. This has captured the interest of academics and practitioners worldwide. Receiving countries recognise the importance of attracting international students as potential residents, especially as they undergo unfavourable demographic changes. The paper aims to present empirical evidence on ISM in Latvia by assessing international student daily life and study experiences. The focus is on examining the perspective of a host country. The study utilises statistical data, survey data and a case study of the University of Latvia to analyse the link between the origin of the student and their choosing Latvia as a non-traditional destination for quality higher education. The findings indicate that Latvia is an attractive destination for young migrants from diverse geographies, including Europe and Southeast Asia and consistent flows of students from former Soviet countries. One of the main factors that draw international students to Latvia is the affordability of education offered in English, providing a “second chance” for achieving success and specific clusters of degree students from European countries studying medicine.

Keywords: international student mobility, mobile students, destination choice, Latvia

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Introduction

Since the early 1990s, Latvia has experienced high levels of emigration. At the same time, the most recent dynamics reveal net migration close to zero and an increasing proportion of the emergent immigrant populations originating from non-European countries. The globalisation and internationalisation of higher education and international student mobility are key drivers for a significant portion of recent immigration. International student mobility (ISM) has raised public awareness of various topics in recent decades, such as the export of higher education, high-

skilled migration, global talent. Attracting potential residents is crucial from the perspective of the receiving nations. This is especially appealing to nations experiencing negative demographic changes. The degree to which a migrant can integrate into the different local systems will also determine how much of an impact they have on their local community.

A significant portion of migration research is influenced by the neoclassical viewpoint, which posits that push and pull factors are crucial in shaping student decisions regarding international student mobility (ISM) (RAGHURAM, P. 2013). The neoclassical perspective suggests that students are driven to

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study abroad due to the push factors in their home countries, such as limited educational opportunities or economic challenges, as well as the pull factors of better educational prospects and improved living conditions in the destination country (RAGHURAM, P. 2013). While analysing push and pull factors has a legitimate role in understanding student mobility, it is vital to approach it cautiously. WELLS, A. highlights the need to handle push and pull factors in ISM research carefully. Cultural, social, and personal aspects can also significantly influence student decisions, and an exclusive focus on economic and educational factors may oversimplify the complexity of student mobility choices (WELLS, A. 2014).

According to institutionally centred analytical frameworks, university systems and other institutions of higher learning have a significant role in influencing and securing student mobility. Available conceptual frameworks frequently consider how a person decides to pursue higher education abroad, their reasons for doing so, and their experiences as international students (FINDLAY, A.M. 2011; VAN MOL, C. and TIMMERMAN, C. 2013; FINDLAY, A. *et al.* 2018). Examining how universities attract international students, provide resources and support services, and offer educational programmes that appeal to international students are examples (FINDLAY, A.M. 2011; VAN MOL, C. and TIMMERMAN, C. 2013). Overall, student mobility abroad can give them worthwhile experiences and long-term advantages. As a result, institutions must value student mobility and help individuals who want to take advantage of overseas study opportunities.

All factors are the desire to go abroad, learn a new culture, and improve language abilities. The desire to receive an outstanding education, increased employment chances, and the availability of more courses are all examples of pull forces. After deciding to study abroad, the student should consider the chosen location's numerous aspects, including the cost of living, the ease of obtaining a visa, the standard of instruction, and safety.

In the decision-making process, both student-centred and institution-centred approach is vital. The decision-making process, motives, and experiences of the person as an overseas student are considered from a student-centred approach. After carefully considering these elements, the student can choose particular options, such as a university and course.

Students are attracted to study abroad by external forces from their home countries (MAZZAROL, T. and SOUTAR, G. 2002). Greater educational possibilities and quality compared to their home country, a better opportunity to learn a foreign language, the desire to live abroad and experience a new culture, access to better work chances, and exposure to other cultures is the main draw factors for international students. The reputation and acceptance of a nation on the global stage, as well as the accessibility of social services and support for students, are other factors that drive students to a foreign country. With this experience, students may have a rare chance to explore a foreign culture, expand their worldwide network, and gain an essential global perspective while studying abroad (LULLE, A. and BUZINSKA, L. 2017). Studying abroad can be an excellent opportunity to gain new skills and experiences, however, it is vital to consider the financial, cultural and emotional costs of studying abroad. Global citizenship and enhanced cross-cultural understanding are only two of the countless advantages of international student mobility. Additionally, mobile students are exposed to many educational techniques and have access to beneficial resources and research opportunities, so they are more likely to succeed academically (BRYLA, P. 2019). More student mobility can result in better personal growth since it exposes students to other cultures, helps them establish friends, and boosts their confidence (RYE, S.A. 2014).

The cost of studying abroad, which includes tuition fees, housing costs, and living expenditures, must be considered by students. Exchange rates and foreign money might increase studying abroad costs (LULLE,

A. and BUZINSKA, L. 2017). This might be a significant barrier for students who need more resources to pay for the expenses of studying abroad. Language and cultural difficulties can also be significant obstacles for overseas students. Getting used to new languages, cultures, and surroundings can be challenging (LULLE, A. and BUZINSKA, L. 2017). The emotional cost of studying abroad and any stress from being so distant from home must also be considered.

The paper aims to present empirical evidence on ISM in Latvia by assessing international student daily life and study experiences. The paper's first section reviews recent literature on ISM by outlining the theoretical framework, followed by current ISM dynamics in Latvia. The result section outlines the decision-making preferences of Latvia as a study destination in Europe among geographically various student groups. Finally, it exemplifies the case study of the University of Latvia.

Literature review

Most studies on international student mobility (ISM) have predominantly used quantitative methods to explore its drivers and impacts. However, recent research has started to employ qualitative methods to uncover the complexities of student mobility, such as the lived experiences of international students and the development of transnational networks (FINDLAY, A.M. *et al.* 2012).

The research on ISM has identified various push and pull factors, including personal, societal, and economic influences on the decision to pursue a degree overseas. Previous studies have emphasised the role of institutional and political policies in shaping the internationalisation of higher education and the potential effects of ISM on sending and receiving nations. YANG, P. (2022) highlights the importance of these factors. The perspectives of different organisations, institutions, and individuals involved in the institutional structure of ISM have made it challenging for academics and policymakers to under-

stand student mobility. WELLS, A. (2014) and GÜMÜŞ, S. *et al.* (2020) discuss the difficulties arising from these diverse perspectives.

The push and pull theory help to understand study abroad decisions by considering socioeconomic, cultural, and political environments in both the home and destination countries. The social-demand theory emphasises push factors like escaping poverty and violence and seeking better educational opportunities. In contrast, the supply-side theory focuses on pull factors like the quality of host institutions, research facilities, and the chance to gain international exposure and experience. Cultural considerations, such as the desire for cultural exchange and language acquisition, also influence the decision to study abroad (FINDLAY, A.M. 2011).

Regarding individual and broader societal factors, FINDLAY, A.M. (2011) presents a comprehensive methodology for comprehending the complexities of international student mobility. This approach has been applied in numerous empirical investigations, proving valuable in understanding international students' diverse motivations and decisions (JIANI, M.A. 2017).

LI, M. and BRAY, M. (2007) further explore the concept of "reverse push and pull variables", which suggests that students engaged in internationalisation may experience a form of "push" from their home countries. Examples of such variables include pressure from family or friends to return home and a lack of support while travelling abroad. Despite the attractive factors of the host country, these variables can induce feelings of homesickness and increase the likelihood of students returning to their home countries.

Consequently, it is imperative to consider both push and pull factors when attempting to comprehend the motivations and experiences of international students (WELLS, A. 2014). Pull factors predominantly revolve around the favourable aspects of a destination, such as its academic prestige or quality of life. Examples of pull factors in international student migration include the opportunity to pursue higher education overseas,

access to a superior educational system, employment prospects, and exposure to a different culture and language.

Pull factors are associated with the desirability of the host country (MAZZAROL, T. and SOUTAR, G. 2002). The primary pull factors encompass the quality of higher education, the potential for enhanced employment prospects, the opportunity to acquire valuable skills and knowledge, the potential for higher salaries, and the experience of residing in a novel cultural setting. Studying abroad affords individuals access to esteemed universities and advanced research facilities, a more diverse student population, and other opportunities unavailable to those who remain in their home country. Furthermore, it allows students to develop a global perspective, acquire proficiency in a second language, and immerse themselves in a new culture (REDDY, J.K. *et al.* 2017).

On the other hand, push factors entail limited employment opportunities, insufficient access to education, inadequate infrastructure, and political instability. Other push factors may encompass the aspiration to evade oppressive social and political systems or to seek economic prospects abroad. In recent years, scholarly investigations concerning international student migration have advanced to encompass a more nuanced comprehension of the phenomenon, acknowledging the intricate interplay between push and pull factors. Research has revealed that migration motivations often originate from multiple sources and are influenced by various individual, social, and economic factors.

The choice of destination is a complex decision involving multiple considerations, including potential educational opportunities, economic and social considerations, cost of living, social connections, and geographic proximity (FINDLAY, A.M. 2011; HU, C. *et al.* 2016; JIANI, M.A. 2017; FINDLAY, A. *et al.* 2018). Access to quality education, economic security, and availability of social networks are among the key factors influencing destination choice (HU, C. *et al.* 2016). Cost of living, language proficiency, and cultural famil-

ilarity are essential considerations (FINDLAY, A.M. 2011). Geographic proximity may also play a role in destination choice, as individuals may be more likely to select destinations close to home or that share similar cultural backgrounds (JIANI, M.A. 2017). Ultimately, the choice of destination is a highly individualised decision based on various factors and considerations. When looking at international student destinations, it is also important to consider how this migration affects local urban change. With the increasing number of international students, the ongoing modernization of higher education infrastructure, and the expansion of university campuses, additional research should focus on phenomena such as studentification. The manifestations and spatial patterns of studentification in Central and Eastern European cities have not been extensively studied (see, for example, FABULA, Sz. *et al.* 2017).

Furthermore, the desired lifestyle and cultural environment also play a significant role in decision-making. Other factors, such as cultural and language barriers, immigration policies, and safety considerations, also influence the choice of destination. Finally, the decision to migrate is often influenced by personal and family networks. For example, family members or friends who have already migrated to a particular country may provide helpful information and assistance in the decision-making process. A migrant network in a foreign country can also act as an incentive to migrate, providing a sense of social support and familiarity in the new environment (LU, Z. *et al.* 2019).

Studying abroad can be a rewarding experience, but it is vital to consider the financial, practical, and emotional implications before deciding to study abroad. Studying abroad can also be expensive and difficult to manage financially (LULLE, A. and BUZINSKA, L. 2017). While financial support from family and personal savings is a primary source of funding for study abroad, students are increasingly opting for scholarships, student loans and work placements to fund their studies (FINDLAY, A.M. *et al.* 2012; RIAÑO, Y. *et al.* 2018).

In addition to the economic and social benefits, youth mobility also has a positive effect on the development of individuals, as it provides them with the opportunity to learn new skills, develop their knowledge and gain new perspectives (BAIRD, S. *et al.* 2021). Another benefit of studying abroad is the opportunity to experience different cultures, which can benefit the student personally and professionally. Studying abroad also allows students to learn from different educational systems, which can lead to better academic success. Additionally, it allows students to gain a global perspective, learn a second language, and experience a new culture (REDDY, J.K. *et al.* 2017).

Furthermore, it allows young adults to make international friends, discover new cultures, and develop a global outlook (KANUNGO, S. 2015). As a result, youth mobility can be beneficial in terms of personal development and social and cultural enrichment (BAIRD, S. *et al.* 2021). International students are also attracted to universities abroad because of the cultural diversity, the opportunity to learn a new language, and the chance to experience a different culture and way of life. This is especially true for students from non-Western countries who are eager to explore different cultures and lifestyles (DOERR, N.M. 2013).

One of the primary motivations for youth mobility is the pursuit of economic growth, career opportunities and better education abroad (BAIRD, S. *et al.* 2021). The competition in the job market has also driven students to pursue higher education abroad to get better job opportunities (BROWN, P. 2013). Additionally, studying abroad can help students become more independent, resourceful and confident in their abilities, which can benefit their future career prospects (HOLLOWAY, S.L. *et al.* 2012). In addition, young adults are more likely to take risks and explore the world beyond the borders of their homelands (KANUNGO, S. 2015). Moreover, young adults often study abroad to gain new experiences. However, abroad students may experience homesickness, loneliness, and culture shock (REDDY,

J.K. *et al.* 2017) even before external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the main drivers of youth mobility are the desire for better job opportunities, the desire to explore different cultures and the need for self-development (KANUNGO, S. 2015).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, international students were heavily affected in terms of mental state, social situation, financial situation, academic achievement, and learning (GALLAGHER, H.L. 2020; YANG, P. 2022). Students were forced to switch to distance learning when schools and institutions closed, and many took a gap year or their examinations online. The added hardship of returning home, frequently with little assurance of being able to do so, was encountered by international students (ELMER, T. *et al.* 2020). The pandemic has impacted international students' mobility and access to education in ways that are still developing and will persist for some time. Nevertheless, higher education institutions have met the challenge by developing strategies and programs to aid international students in adjusting to the new reality (SAHU, P. 2020). In order to give international students a forum to interact with peers, obtain resources and assistance, and share their experiences, several universities have developed online communities for them.

Additionally, several universities have established academic and non-academic support services for international students, including online counselling, language lessons, and workshops on anything from cultural acculturation to job-hunting tactics. These programs show how higher education institutions are dedicated to helping overseas students and actively assisting in their adaptation and integration. To aid international students in maintaining connections with one another and their host countries while receiving practical support, several universities have also planned virtual activities, including cultural celebrations, music performances, and debating groups. Universities will continue to be essential to effectively integrate international students as the globe slowly recovers from the pandemic.

Few studies have examined the internationalisation of higher education and the mobility of international students to Latvia (RIVZA, B. and TEICHLER, U. 2007; AUERS, D. and GUBINS, S. 2016; LULLE, A. and BUZINSKA, L. 2017; PRAZERES, L. *et al.* 2017; CHANKSELIANI, M. and WELLS, A. 2019; APSITE-BERINA, E. *et al.* 2023). Interestingly, research investigating network perspectives concludes that ISM patterns are shifting, and the study also recognises Latvia as a new independent non-traditional destination (HOU, C. and DU, D. 2022). In a study published by CHANKSELIANI, M. and WELLS, A. (2019), it was found that in the small country of Latvia, the movement of international students is seen as an industry that generates substantial sums of foreign revenue. In addition, several universities worry that the inflow of international students poses a danger to their culture (CHANKSELIANI, M. and WELLS, A. 2019). In addition, several ancillary factors can influence international students' decisions to study in a foreign country. These include the availability of housing and accommodation, a good social and cultural environment, strong safety and security, access to public transportation, and access to quality health care (AUERS, D. and GUBINS, S. 2016).

Finally, a strong alum network in the host country can also be a pull factor for international students. This can include the availability of alum events, job opportunities, and mentoring programs. These activities can help students build relationships with other international students, alums, and faculty members, which can provide support and guidance during their study abroad experience (AUERS, D. and GUBINS, S. 2016). Further research is needed to assess the potential impact of international students and ensure their well-being in the host country.

Methodology

The Report on Higher Education in Latvia, released in 2018 by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia (IZM, 2018), is a valuable source of information on

data regarding international students in Latvia. The examination of survey and official statistics data served as the foundation for this mixed-methods study. The first stage of the mixed methods approach uses statistical information from the statistics office and the Ministry of Education and Science to show the actual situation in Latvia regarding the total number of local and international or mobile students (international students are referred to as such in national statistics). The Central Statistical Bureau (CSB) of the Republic of Latvia's database, which shows the number of international students enrolled in Latvian higher education institutions at the beginning of each academic year from 2004 to 2018, also reveals general trends on changes in the number of foreign and overall students in Latvia. Part of the second step of the mixed-methods approach was a survey of international students in Latvia. The survey's primary objective was to find out why international students choose to study in Latvia full-time.

The survey utilised 521 questionnaires from various Latvian higher education institutions and was conducted throughout the spring and fall semesters 2019. A data template was prepared in Excel to construct the analysis.

The sample consists of 521 full-time international students in Latvia who represent 52 different countries geographically. Most respondents (37%) came from the private institution – Turība University studying business and management and tourism; around one-third represent students from the University of Latvia majoring in business and management and medicine, and around 20 percent from Rīga Stradiņš University. The remaining respondents represent students from regional institutions and engineering students from Rīga Technical University. Geographically one-third of respondents are from India, 16 percent are from Germany, 9 percent are from Uzbekistan, 7 percent are from Finland, and 4 percent are from Russia.

For data analysis, the study identified four primary geographic profiles: 1. European countries ($n = 188$); 2. South Asian coun-

tries, including India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka ($n = 177$); 3. Post-Soviet countries ($n = 97$); 4. Other countries such as Canada and the USA. PASW Statistics 18 software was employed for survey data array analysis in this research. Data analysis involved using two econometric methods: 1. Pearson chi-square test; and 2. Analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA).

The final stage of the data used in this study was case study data at the institutional level – the case study from the University of Latvia. In the fall of 2021, the University of Latvia Academic Department (LU) surveyed international students who started their studies in 2021. The purpose of the survey was to find out the students' motivation for choosing a university and study program and, in their opinion, the essential sources of obtaining information, as well as to receive an assessment of the application and registration process. The target group was full-time international students in the first year of primary studies (college and bachelor's) and higher-level studies (master's). A total of 172 international students started their studies at the

University of Latvia in the autumn of 2021, of which 134 students participated in the survey (78% of those studying in the first year).

Dynamics of international students in Latvia

The number of mobile students in Latvia has increased almost six times since 2004 – from 1,677 students in 2004 to 9,810 students in 2021 – making up almost 13 percent of the total students (CSB, 2014, 2022a) (*Figure 1*). The number of mobile students has been increasing since 2005, however, in 2020 and 2021, the number has decreased (IZM, 2021). In the 2021/2022 academic year, 3,800 mobile students have enrolled, which is by a quarter less than at the beginning of the 2019/2020 academic year. However, for the second consecutive year, the total number of mobile students, which had been on a significant upward trend before the COVID-19 pandemic, has slightly decreased (CSB, 2022b).

Up until the outbreak of the pandemic, international students in Latvia were on the rise yearly (*Figure 2*). Most were students from

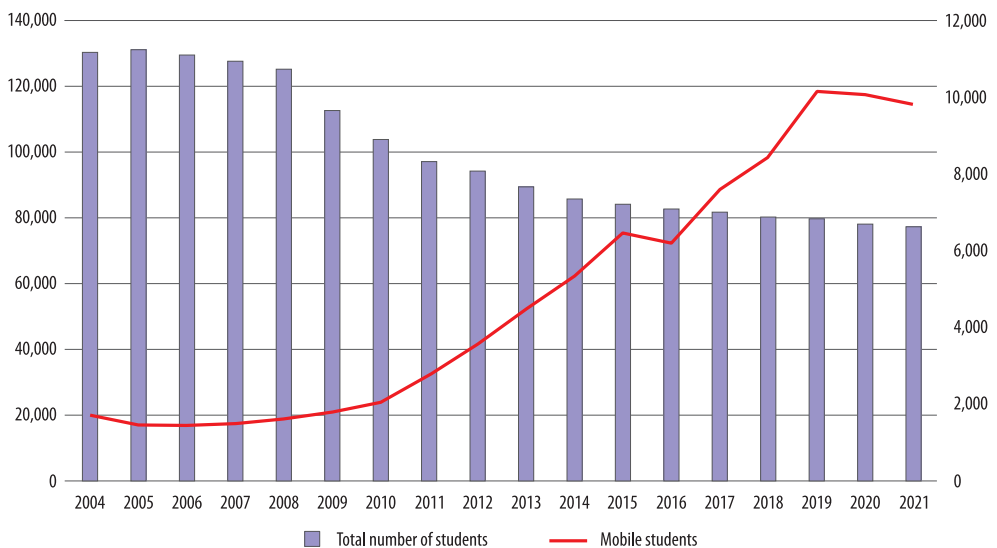


Fig. 1. Dynamics of total number of students and mobile students in Latvia, 2004–2021. *Source:* Author's own elaboration based on data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia.

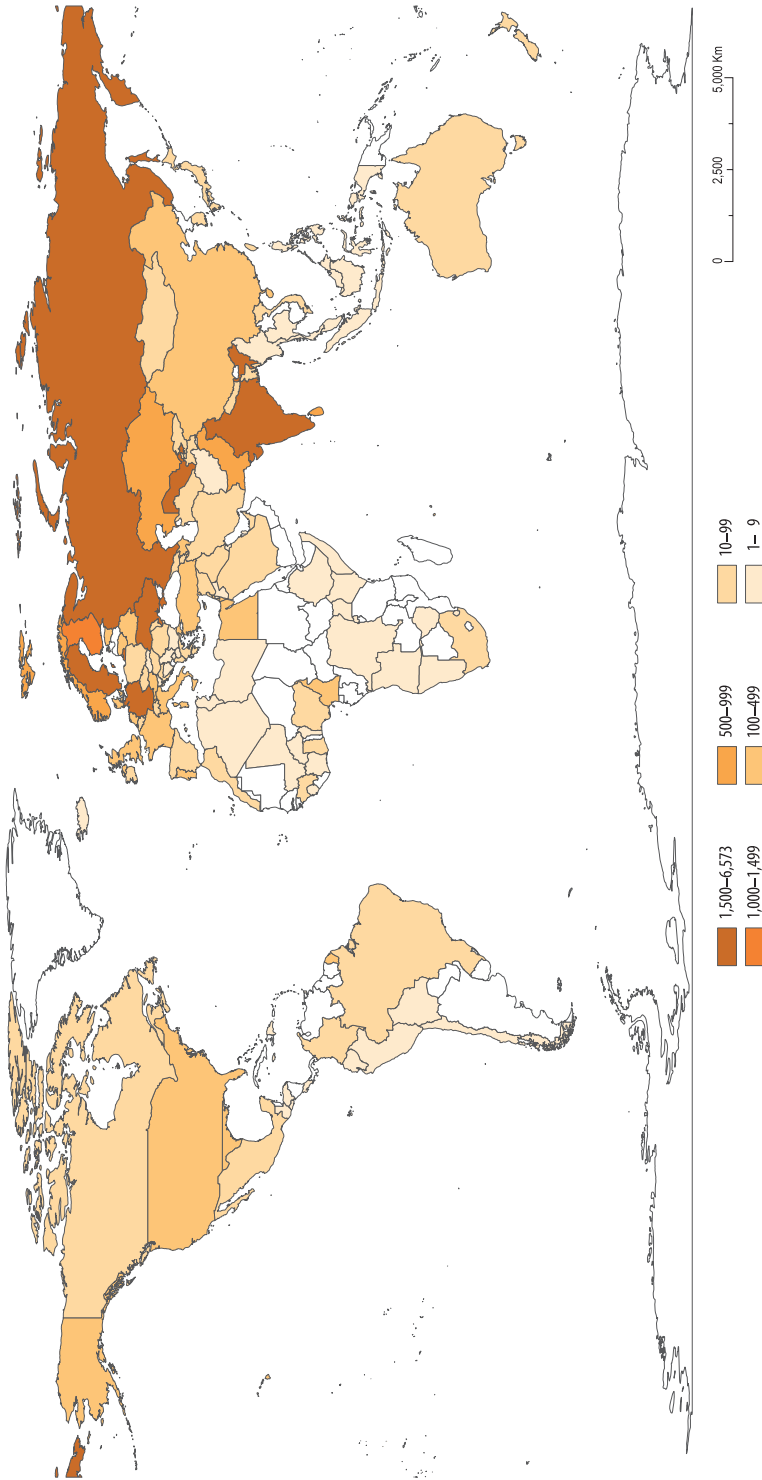


Fig. 2. Number of international students in Latvia by countries of origin, 2019–2021. *Source:* Author's own elaboration based on data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia.

three parts of the world: Europe, the former Soviet Union's republics, and Southeast Asia. The former Soviet Union republics of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan are home to many international students in Latvia. They accounted for 47 percent of all international students in 2020. Southeast Asian students, who comprised 28 percent of all international students in Latvia, were the second-largest group.

With 25 percent of all international students in Latvia, the third-largest group was from Europe. According to data from the Ministry of Education and Science, the number of international students has climbed by 82 percent over the previous three years, reaching 10,000 at the start of last year, which was 20 percent more than in 2019 and a half as much as in 2014.

Most mobile students (70.4%) have received their previous education in countries outside the European Union, and almost two-thirds are males. In recent years, it can be consistently observed that about half of the total number of mobile students are students who received their previous education

in India, Uzbekistan and Germany (41.8% of the total number). More than half (58.2%) of the students from Germany studying in Latvian higher education institutions are females. In comparison, most students from India and Uzbekistan who have come to study in Latvia are males (82.7% and 81.0%, respectively). More than 2,000 mobile students who received their previous education in India are currently studying in Latvian higher education institutions. Compared to 2014, when statistics on mobile students were first collected, this number has increased more than ten times (CSB, 2022b).

In 2021, 116 different nations' citizens attended higher education institutions in Latvia (CSB, 2022a). The most common fields of study for mobile students are social sciences, business, and law (41.2%), health and welfare (29.3%), and natural sciences, mathematics, and information technologies (11.6%) (Figure 3). Almost half (49.2%) of the mobile student study at the master's level, while 45.8 percent study at the bachelor's level. Of the mobile students with prior education in EU countries, 85.6 percent study at the master's level. Most mobile stu-

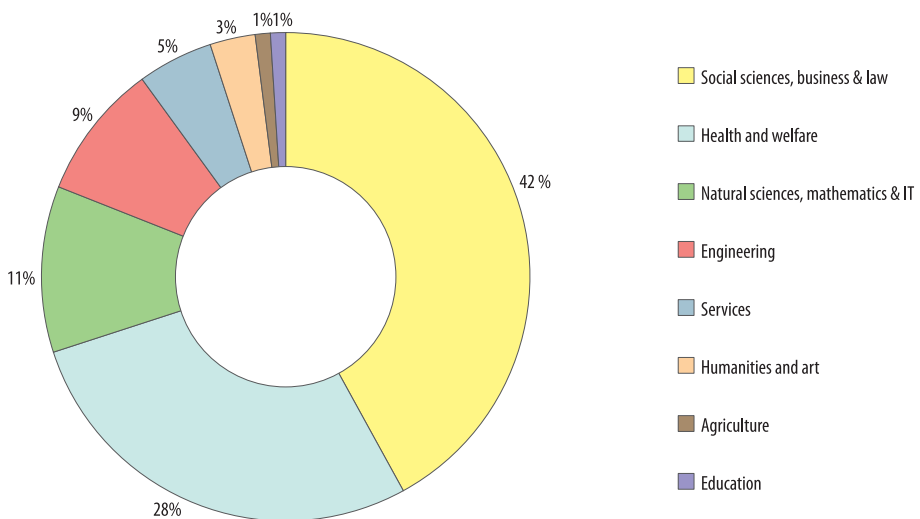


Fig. 3. Share of international students in Latvia by thematic education group, 2019–2021. Source: Author's own elaboration based on data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia.

dents with previous education in EU countries study Health and social welfare programmes (78.1%) (CSB 2022b).

In terms of total numbers, most mobile students (2,500) study at Riga Stradins University, almost 80 percent of whom have completed their studies in an EU country. This compares with 52.6 percent at the University of Latvia, and only 3.2 percent at Riga Technical University of mobile students with previous education in EU countries. These three universities have 5,000 students, or 51.5 percent of the total mobile student population (CSB 2022b).

Why choosing Latvia as a study destination country: Geography as a precondition for study destination choice

Survey results from the year 2019 show that students from India, Germany, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan are the countries that most frequently choose Latvia as their study-abroad location. More in-depth statistical analysis of the data presented in *Table 1* indicates a statistically significant relationship among the four groups of students. Specifically, the findings demonstrate that Latvia is more likely to be the primary choice for students from South Asian countries but less likely to be the preferred destination for students from Europe and post-Soviet countries.

These results suggest that Latvia serves as a secondary option for students from countries with limited study opportunities, either due to a restricted number of students in specific study programs (e.g., medicine in Germany, France) or the overall availability of educational resources in their home country (e.g., Uzbekistan). The motivations of these students vary, although they all share the same goal, obtaining a quality education in Latvia. While students from India select Latvia on purpose as a location to obtain a European certificate, students from European nations travel to Latvia to study if, for some reason, they are unable to complete the needed education in their own countries.

Table 1. Analysis of factors significant in the host country

| Measure/region | Europe | | Southeast Asia | | Post-Soviet | | Other | | F(3,492) |
|------------------------|--------|------|----------------|------|-------------|------|-------|------|----------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | |
| Quality of studies | 3.69 | 1.14 | 4.02 | 1.15 | 4.16 | 0.88 | 4.04 | 1.37 | 4.72** |
| Baltic region | 2.14 | 1.22 | 3.38 | 1.29 | 2.60 | 1.28 | 2.14 | 1.38 | 29.71** |
| Studies in English | 4.08 | 1.09 | 4.13 | 1.18 | 4.44 | 0.93 | 3.96 | 1.48 | 2.78* |
| Friends in Latvia | 1.66 | 1.11 | 2.13 | 1.35 | 1.86 | 1.20 | 1.48 | 1.05 | 5.04** |
| Family in Latvia | 1.34 | 0.98 | 1.62 | 1.16 | 1.48 | 1.02 | 1.28 | 0.89 | 2.29* |
| Employment | 1.61 | 1.09 | 2.94 | 1.39 | 3.04 | 1.32 | 2.88 | 1.48 | 42.11** |
| Cost of living | 2.70 | 1.16 | 3.77 | 1.25 | 3.54 | 1.07 | 3.21 | 1.40 | 25.29** |
| Culture and traditions | 2.69 | 1.20 | 3.77 | 1.25 | 3.14 | 1.36 | 2.93 | 1.41 | 21.16** |
| Capital Riga | 3.15 | 1.39 | 3.57 | 1.30 | 2.96 | 1.50 | 3.00 | 1.59 | 4.99** |
| Russian language | 1.47 | 1.09 | 2.44 | 1.31 | 2.55 | 1.56 | 1.63 | 1.20 | 19.38** |

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.001.

Riga as a destination was rated relatively high, as studied in the Baltic region. German students had given lower ratings for these factors. The possibility of studying in English was acknowledged in Latvia as one of the most significant considerations in favour of studying this area in a recognised quality. Students from Germany primarily travel to Latvia to study medicine. The study also explained the geographical locations that international students find most concerning while relocating to Latvia. Concerns regarding access to social services and medical care throughout their studies are shared among international students.

Geographically three sourcing regions are highlighted: Europe, former Soviet Union countries, and Southeast Asian countries. Analysis also shows different initial motives and plans among respondents. For example, European students most often study medicine, and Latvia is usually a low priority when choosing a destination. Students from former Soviet Union countries often come to Latvia to study technical programs like engineering, computer sciences, and economics. Southeast Asian students often choose Latvia to study business and finance.

A detailed analysis of the decision-making process regarding studying in Latvia reveals several vital factors. Firstly, the importance of studying English and the quality of education emerged as crucial considerations. This factor received the highest overall mean rating (4.44) among students from post-Soviet countries, followed by South Asian respondents (4.13) and European students (4.80).

Conversely, the lowest factor across all groups in considering Latvia as a destination choice was the level of engagement with friends and relatives from Latvia. Additionally, the desire for employment opportunities ranked modestly, with a mean value of 3.04 among students from post-Soviet countries, 2.94 among Southeast Asian students, and the lowest among Europeans, with a mean value of 1.61. The increasing number of international students engaging in the local labour market across various

economic fields raises concerns. However, it prompts the question of whether international students' knowledge and skills align with Latvia's economic development priorities.

Latvia is a popular destination for international students due to its low tuition fees and living costs compared to other European countries. The quality of education is also high, and the country is politically stable. Furthermore, Latvia is part of the European Union, which allows students to easily access the labour market and travel to other EU countries.

Due to its affordable tuition and generally high educational standards, Latvia is one of the most alluring nations for overseas students from Southeast Asia. According to only one-third of respondents from EU nations, studying in Latvia was their first option. Students from Southeast Asia comprise a quarter of this group. They are more likely than students from post-Soviet countries – over half of the respondents – to choose Latvia as their top study destination.

The availability of high-quality education, affordable tuition, and the chance to study abroad were the critical factors in choosing. Latvia is a study-abroad location. Latvia is a popular location for students from Southeast Asia since it is one of the safest nations in Europe. In addition, Latvia provides a variety of scholarships, as well as cultural and other events, for overseas students. When choosing a destination country, it was crucial for them to study in English and to have high-calibre education, according to a thorough review of the decision-making process. The overall mean value rating for this indicator is rated highest by students from post-soviet nations (4.44), followed by respondents from Southeast Asia (4.13), and students from Europe (4.80) study-abroad.

Furthermore, the research findings indicate that Southeast Asian students value Latvia's affordable living expenses. Conversely, students from wealthier European nations, such as Finland, Sweden, France, and Germany, consider living expenses less significant. On the other hand, students from post-Soviet nations, including Russia, Uzbekistan, and Belarus,

prefer the higher chances of finding work in Latvia and the opportunity to socialise in the Russian language. This preference aligns with the prevailing trend of students from post-Soviet countries engaging in part-time employment while pursuing their studies. A significant Russian-speaking population in Latvia, particularly in the capital city of Riga, makes it easier for students from post-Soviet nations to connect with others and explore potential career opportunities. As a result, they tend to secure employment in Latvia more readily than students from other student groups.

The findings further confirm that Latvia is often regarded as a “second choice” among European students as a study destination. Their level of importance in obtaining a European diploma is relatively lower than students from other regions. This discrepancy could be attributed to the students’ geographic origin, as studying within Europe is often seen as more accessible and expected for European students. In contrast, individuals from more distant regions may perceive a European diploma as a significant achievement.

Additionally, European students tend to rate most motivational factors lower than students from other groups, except for the desire to live in a city. This suggests that the appeal of Riga as a study location and the chosen study program hold considerable value for European students, compensating for other motivational aspects.

Experience from the University of Latvia

The findings of the survey conducted by the University of Latvia, encompassing a majority of international students, revealed the program preferences of the participants. Out of the total 172 international students surveyed, the majority chose to pursue healthcare programs (56%), followed by information technology (12%), management, administration, and real estate management (10%), and language and cultural studies (9%). Among the respondents, 81 percent were studying at the undergraduate level, while 19 percent were

enrolled in higher-level programs. Moreover, regarding geography, 46 percent are citizens of the European Union (EU), including 16 percent from Finland, and 12 percent from Germany, while 54 percent are citizens of other countries, including 13 percent from India, and 7 percent from Russia.

18 percent of respondents’ mother tongue is Russian, 12 percent German, 8 percent English, and 62 percent another language. The majority (92%) of students, rated their knowledge of the English language as good or excellent.

The main reasons that influenced the choice of the study program were the ambition to gain knowledge about this field, the opportunity to study in English, the industry’s perspective in the future, and the subjects of this field that were good at school. The most significant differences between groups of countries can be observed: full-time job opportunities in Latvia after graduation (marked by 30% of citizens of EU countries and 57% of citizens of other countries).

The main reasons that influenced the choice to study directly at the University of Latvia among students from EU countries were the desire to learn new knowledge or deepen existing knowledge (97%), the desire to obtain a university diploma to prove oneself and one’s abilities (95%), the study programs offered by the University of Latvia (92%), as well as the opportunity to obtain quality education (90%). In addition to these factors, students from other countries also highly valued the visibility of the University of Latvia (85%, of which students from the EU 72%). Students rated the opportunity to get a state scholarship the lowest.

According to the University of Latvia, international students cluster in medicine from Finland and Germany, followed by degree students from Uzbekistan and India. Among those specific geographic and study field choices, studies at the University of Latvia have been a priority choice. These results contradict when considering results from all universities and study fields in Latvia. Studies in medicine are well known for their quality at the European level and elsewhere.

Conclusions

This article presents evidence on trends of international student mobility to Latvia by linking the geography of the source country. It discusses the perspective of Latvia as a non-traditional destination country.

The research findings highlight the student's country of origin's significant role in choosing Latvia as a study destination. While students from Southeast Asia prioritise Latvia over other potential destinations due to its affordability and availability of English-language education, students from the former Soviet Union do not consider it as their first choice. However, it remains a prominent study location for European students. The results indicate that factors such as low tuition fees, the attractiveness of the city, and the appeal of the chosen study program play a crucial role in influencing European students to select Latvia as their destination country. The findings imply that the European diploma's value is lower among European students and that the student's place of origin heavily influences the decision-making process. Additionally, the findings imply that choosing to study in Latvia is likely influenced by the allure of the nation's culture and way of life and the possibility of obtaining a job there. However, due to language barriers and lack of job opportunities, most international students need to be better integrated into the local labour market.

Latvian higher education institutions can use the results of this study to develop enticing programmes and marketing materials that emphasise the benefits of studying there. The main reasons for choosing Latvia as a destination country are its low cost of living, low tuition fees, and good quality of education. International students in Latvia appreciate the multilingual environment.

The findings can also guide marketing plans for student groups interested in studying in Latvia. Finally, the findings of this study may be utilised to guide national and local governments in making decisions on how to promote higher education in Latvia and recruit international students effectively.

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