

# Architectural studies in the European Higher Education Area: Criteria for student degree mobility

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**Abstract:** The European Higher Education Area was implemented as a result of the Bologna Process and set the mobility of students and staff as its main goal, suggesting tools to facilitate it. The European Union has supported the suggested measures, as mobility can be a way to support a common European identity and a strategic way to improve the quality of higher education institutes. Architectural studies, due to their special character as both an art and a science discipline, are chosen as the education area most suited for mapping degree mobility and highlighting the characteristics that differentiate each school in terms of attraction to international students. How do architectural students select the school to continue their studies? On what criteria is that based? There were more than 351 schools of architecture in the European Higher Education Area with 49 participating countries at the time the research was conducted. Do international students choose them at the same degree? What makes a difference between them, causing some of them to become famous schools of excellence while others are barely visible in the international competition? To answer the above questions, a research based on two questionnaires was conducted during the academic year 2018-2019. The aim of both questionnaires was to map the state of the art in architectural studies and determine the criteria students value the most to make their choices at master studies. The process of combining the data collected from both questionnaires showed that the study programmes and the city or country of the school are the main reasons for master's students to choose a specific school and for schools to stand out. This is followed by the criteria: offered studies' quality, institution's reputation, teaching language, the host city's economy, giving students the possibility to work during and/or after studies, the offer of third cycle. The paper concludes suggesting changes schools could implement if they wish to get a better position in the competitive market of attracting international students.

**Keywords:** degree mobility, architectural studies, criteria, master's studies

## INTRODUCTION

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) ([www.ehea.info](http://www.ehea.info)) was implemented in 2010, after the signing of the Bologna Declaration in June 1999, with the cooperation of initially 29 ministries responsible for higher education in European countries – both members and non-members of the European Union. Nowadays members of the EHEA are 49 countries and the European Commission. There are also 8 consultative members (The European Student Union, UNESCO, The European University Association, and others) and some organizations which do not meet the members' criteria as partners. The target of the EHEA is to apply structural reforms and share tools and continuously adapt members' higher education systems, making them more compatible and strengthening their quality assurance mechanisms. The main goal is to increase staff and student mobility and to facilitate employability as stated on the EHEA's site. Mobility, as various research reports (European Union 2015, Erasmus Student Network, [www.esn.org](http://www.esn.org)) showed, assists each participant in gaining experience and growing at a personal level, but most importantly, provides Higher Education Institutes with a tool to improve and take advantage of the experience that their staff and students gain while teaching or studying at other institu-

tions. The distance from the home institution allows the recognition of its position in comparison with the host institution, making visible the strengths and weaknesses of each institution. Especially for architecture students, mobility broadens their thinking through the new cultural and academic environment of the host country. During their stay in the host country, language skills improve, which is positively attributed to the personal and professional development of the students. The benefits also include the creation of networks and collaborative relationships between students as well as the strengthening of their mature thinking and international orientation (Spiridonidis, 2002).

Some schools of architecture perceived the Bologna Process and the implementation of the EHEA as an opportunity to look ahead and ensure a better place in international competition, acquiring a contemporary European identity, useful and necessary for their status, while others encounter them with scepticism regarding the creation of a common system of studies (Spiridonidis, 2006). This scepticism opened a discourse, expressed through annual meetings of the European Network of Heads of Schools of Architecture (ENHSA), leading to feedback regarding the Bologna Process implementation in architectural studies. The changes suggested are the implementation of the

ECTS system, requiring at least 300 ECTS credits to access the architectural profession, a comparable and flexible set of skills achieved through programmes of integrated or two-cycle studies, and quality assurance of architectural programme studies. All of these can facilitate the mobility of students and boost the mobility of staff.

Regarding mobility for studies, UNESCO's data (UNESCO, 2022) show a great imbalance between incoming and outgoing students among the European countries, with some of these countries being neat exporters and others mostly student importers. In the last category, we see the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Russian Federation, countries with well-organized higher education systems and great history in teaching, marketing of offered studies, and a high position in the HEI ranking systems. On the other side, small north European or former Soviet Union countries are mainly student exporters and struggle to compete at the internationalization level. Why are some schools so popular while others have fewer or no incoming students? On what basis do bachelor's degree holders choose the school for their master's studies? Which are the students' main criteria? Can the non-preferable institutions take some action to change the situation and attract international students and staff?

To map the mobility from the first to second cycle, we chose to research architectural studies. As the European Union considers architecture as one of the regulated professions and holding a 3-year bachelor's in architecture does not provide the holder with the right to work as a fully licensed architect, students tend to continue their study at master's or even doctoral level and combine that second or third study period with the experience of studying in another country. Architecture is a wide field of study, science, and art at the same time, and its students need a variety of stimuli and different experiences to broaden their horizons. Therefore, architecture students participate more than others in mobility programs, either during their first cycle, with exchange programmes such as Erasmus and Erasmus+, or during degree mobility, when the whole study period takes place in a different city or country than the one in which they got their former degree; the aforementioned data shows why architecture can be a good case study on degree mobility from bachelor (first cycle) to master (second cycle) degrees.

Various research (Altbach, 2001, 2007; Rachaniotis, 2013; Guerreiro, 2018) showed the criteria that may influence the choice of place and/or institution for second-cycle studies. These are: the quality of studies offered by a country or institution, the pre-colonial regime and the cultural or other relations between home and host countries, the need or lack of need for visa, the common language, the GDP of the host country, national security, economic growth, reputation of the HEI and its brand. Other students' selection criteria were the possibility of finding a job in the country of relocation after graduation, a fact related to the economic situation of the host country, as well as the possibility that a degree from a renowned university could enhance students' salary prospects and give access to more interesting jobs at the international labour market, and special and recognized prestige of the institution. These figures give a strong lead in developed countries, with English as the main spoken language (such as the United Kingdom) as well as those with former colonial relations (France, Spain). The paper unfolds as follows: presents research on architectural master students and architectural schools regarding mobility focusing on the criteria that push master students to specific schools.

## METHODOLOGY

The research was completed in 2 questionnaires, collecting data during the academic year 2018-19. The first questionnaire was sent to 351 schools of architecture regarding the state of the art of the offered study programmes. We have collected 103 an-

swers which is a quite representative random sample of almost all the EHEA countries. The questionnaire had 31 questions of various types: 6 questions were demographic or descriptive, 6 were answered by selecting population range, 12 allowed choices between 2 to 7 values, 6 regarded short growth and 2 were open questions. Fig. 1 shows the countries of schools participating in the research. The second questionnaire was addressed to master students from the 50 schools which responded to the first questionnaire and declared a number of incoming students. We have received 101 answers from master students in 12 countries. Our sample is random and statistically adequate, coming from an adequate random sample of schools, and had 15 closed questions with 2 to 7 choices, 11 questions were a short description, and one was a 5-degree Likert scale. The aim of the first questionnaire was to map the state of the art in architectural studies, showing the strong points each school has to offer. In the second questionnaire, master's students classified the reasons that influenced their choice of school, also giving data regarding their mobility.

At the beginning of both questionnaires, we asked for demographic data. For the schools, these were the institution's name and site, status, and the e-mail address of the person providing the answers. For students, we asked for information about sex, age, the city or country of secondary studies and first-degree school, to map their mobility. Important data regarding internationalization of schools came through the answer to how many graduates of the first cycle of other institutions continue their second cycle studies at the specific institution and how many of them were coming from other countries. These data showed about 20 schools with more than 30% of their second cycle students' population coming from other institutions, either from the same country or from abroad. The second questionnaire was addressed to architectural master students. As direct contact to master's students was impossible due to confidentiality issues, the questionnaire was sent to the 50 schools which reported incoming students to their master's study programmes in the first questionnaire, with a request to pass it on to their master's students. After the demographical questions, they noted the country in which they got their former degrees, such as high school and the first (bachelor) degree, to map the students' mobility patterns. The students' home country is shown on Fig. 2.

Students that participated in mobility programs, either short-lasting, such as in the Erasmus exchange program, or full degree, are more likely to participate in mobility programmes or stay in the host country after the end of their studies to work, as stated in former research (Wiers-Jensden, 2012). There was a specific question, "Will you stay in the country you study in case you get a job offer?" where almost 90% of the students answered "yes" or "maybe", showing that they are thinking positively about it. Through these answers, we verify the statements in articles regarding brain drain (Straubhaar, 2000; Breinbauer, 2007) and the wish of the graduates to stay and work in their student city, especially when the work opportunities in their home country are less favourable. Noting the mobility patterns, we found 58.41% of students who did not move from their home city at any stage of their studies, 20.79% who moved to another city within their country, and 20.79% who moved outside their home country for master's studies. That is close to the goal of 20% international mobility for students set by the European Union in the 2020 strategy (European Commission, 2010). As much as 11.88% came from countries outside the EHEA and Europe, showing that Europe approaches the goal to be a knowledge metropolis, attracting international students from all over the world.

Regarding the language of tuition, almost 40% of the students stated that the programme they attend is delivered in English and it is in the English-speaking programmes we find most of

the mobility students. The rest stated that the programmes are taught in the local language. Some countries offer local language lessons as part of their internationalization policies in support of the degree studies, allowing international students to participate in study programmes delivered in the local language. Trying to map the criteria students use to choose the school they continue their studies in, we asked the participants to grade on the Likert scale from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely

important) some criteria collected through literature review. Those criteria were (in random order): Country or city of studies, language of tuition, fees or cost of living, study programme, further education opportunities, good reputation of the Institution, labour market needs, friends or family in the city, counselling and disability support, job opportunities. The following table shows the answers received. For statistical reasons, 5 scales have been merged into 3.



Fig. 1. Countries participating in the research. (Source: Author created with mapchart.net)



Fig. 2. Students' home country. (Source: Author created with mapchart.net)

**Tab. 1.** Students' answers to scaling criteria in %. (Source: Author)

	Not at all or not important	Important	Very or extremely important
Study programme	4	26.7	69.3
Country or city of studies	11	28	61
Institution's good reputation	14.9	24.8	60.4
Fees or cost of living	12.9	27.7	59.4
Job opportunities	15.8	24.8	59.4
Further education opportunities	16.9	29.7	53.4
Language of tuition	21.2	33.3	45.4
Labour Market needs	20.2	39.4	40.4
Family and friends in the city	47	30	23
Counselling and disability support	66.3	22.8	10.9

The first criterion is the study programme which was rated by 96.04% as "Important" or "Very or extremely important". In architecture, with so many parameters, the degree to which every school adopts each of the terms and the weight it gives to each strand gives the stigma of its curriculum based on the dipoles: artistic vs scientific, technological vs academic, specialization vs general education. As during the first cycle the basic knowledge of architecture is covered, at the master level deeper knowledge is acquired and schools provide specialization to respond to modern needs such as bioclimatic architecture, new materials, restoration, societal needs, etc. allowing students to build their individual curriculum according to personal inclination. Schools also point out their study programmes as their strong point in response to question 1 in the questionnaire, "What do you think is your school's strong point in attracting students from other countries?" They also stated the programmes focus on local culture (especially in countries or cities with great architectural history), interdisciplinary studies, diversity, studios, and workshops, the "Dortmunder Modell" that combines architecture and engineering, well-organized labs, and elements that characterize a study program, and are valued by students and teachers as well.

The country or city of studies and a good reputation of the school were chosen as "Very or extremely important" by 60.39% of the respondents. Some cities have the reputation of student cities as they have university campuses within the city and provide a special environment for their students. The high reputation of a school is also reflected in the degree it grants. Some grants are highly respected in the labour market, especially in architecture. Students know that and seek those 'famous' degrees, even if they must pay higher fees to retain them. Both criteria - the country or city and the school's reputation - were pointed out also by schools as their strong point in attracting foreign students. As much as 59.40% of the respondents rated fees and the cost of living as "Very or extremely important", without defining whether it is evaluated negatively for high costs or positively for the general economic situation in the country or city. Crosschecking with other parameters revealed that high fees are not a negative selection criterion, especially if combined with a great school reputation and curriculum. Students are willing to invest more money to gain a highly recognized master's degree that will lead them to a better career in the future.

Job opportunities, either during the study period or after graduation, are important to master students, as some of them prefer or have to work during their studies to cover their expenses. Some countries with good financial condition and developed economies attract students easily, as they may work during their study period or after they attain the degree and that is easier to find in developed countries in Central and Northern Europe. In addition, schools based in cities with developed economies cooperate with the industry, giving more training and job opportunities to their students and degree holders. The chance to continue their studies to the third cycle (doctoral studies) at the same school is also marked as important. Architecture, with so many themes to research, from new materials to restoration and new city plans and land use, is ideal for further research at the PhD level. Some schools offer well-organized and financially supported PhD research and that may add to the incoming mobility at second cycles.

The labour market needs may influence students to choose a specific school, as stated by 78.21% of the students. After the decade of financial worldwide crisis, architects take seriously the fields they can work in after graduating and choose schools that can provide the best study support and a degree that can open work opportunities in the future. Teaching in English is selected as "Important" or "Very or extremely important" by 77.23% of the students, ranked 7th among the criteria, but when crosschecked with the variable of participation in mobility, it was revealed that English as a teaching language is the 2nd most important criterion for mobile students. Mobile students consider instruction in an international language a plus for the school and tend to prefer it to the instruction in a language they do not speak. Schools also highly rank instruction in an international language as their strong point or as the point they need to change if they wish to attract international students.

The presence of family or friends is not highly rated. It receives only 52.47% as "Important" or "Very or extremely important". Master-level students are usually in their twenties and can live in a city with no family members to support (or control them). Students rated counselling and disability support the lowest. Architecture students may not be aware of the possibilities counselling can offer, to them it either refers to study choices or to support to find a workplace. To recapitulate, students choose schools that have exceptional study programmes, well-trained teaching staff with international experience, offer lessons in the English language, and are situated in regions and cities with high income. The possibility to work during the study period and continue to the third cycle is also a strong reason to choose a specific school.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Combining the results of both questionnaires, to architectural schools and students, regarding the reasons students choose some schools over others, we see that both schools and students rank the curriculum or the study programme very high. A well-structured curriculum, with flexibility, originality, connection with the natural landscape, the city, and the country where the school is located, as well as new materials and state-of-the-art technologies and international design perspectives through participation in international competitions and related events, will allow students to create the study programme they wish to attend, according to their interests and create a unique architectural profile, boosting their career and support the school in attracting international students. Well-trained teachers, with international experience and great teaching methods, add to the school's value and attraction to students.

Regarding the city of the school, as mentioned both by schools

and students, most of the highly ranked schools are in capital cities, or cities with growing economies and influence within the country. That is a point that schools cannot control. Regarding financial growth, schools in cities with stronger economies tend to co-operate with developed and well-known businesses, giving their students the chance to work, even in short time practice and gain working experience, making it a strong point for their curriculum vitae. The chance to get to work with one of the famous teaching architects and pioneers of architecture is a strong point for choosing or not choosing a school. The school's reputation, as is known by graduates, works in favour of the already known schools. Students are affected by word of mouth of former satisfied students and successful graduate architects add points to the known schools. Less known schools mentioned as their weak points the need to work on their image and marketing, trying to make their school more visible and recognized worldwide. Research, publications, and media reports can help to this effect.

Pointing out the criteria students use to choose a higher institution for their second-level studies, and through it, the internationalization degree of the HEIs in the European Higher Education Area was the question of this research. The analysis showed that students prefer to continue to master-level studies at well-known schools, with exceptional curriculum or study programmes and famous architects as teachers. They wish to experience living in a developed economy country and city, where they can work during or after their studies and where they will have opportunities to continue their studies to the third cycle. Also, mobile students highly rate the programmes in English, as a criterion to choose a specific master's study programme abroad. Research has shown that some institutions attract a larger number of undergraduate and post-graduate students than others, as reflected in the number of applications submitted. The schools that are in capitals and/or urban centres stand out. If they have a study programme that stands out, they manage to gather large numbers of students from other institutions. English-language degrees and chances to work, during or after the study period, tend to attract international students.

Other, less favoured schools should keep in mind the criteria stated by the master students. A well-built curriculum, supported by international staff with pedagogical education, can attract more international students. Teaching in international languages, mainly English, can support the incoming degree mobility. The cooperation with businesses and industry, as well as other schools worldwide can make the school more visible across the country's borders. The internationalization policy, both at the country and the school level, can support the incoming mobility of students and staff in smaller schools. As the covid-19 pandemic changed the way with think in many aspects and accelerated the use of technology in education, new research on the same subject could deliver interesting results regarding physical degree mobility. Distance learning gains ground as compared to the typical forms of education. Even in architecture, with all the specialties already mentioned, master's studies can be offered that way.

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