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Latvian students abroad, evolving cultural capital and return intentions

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2016

Abstract

This paper visualises tertiary-level students who study abroad as simultaneously both international students and members of an emerging diaspora. Coming from a country (Latvia) which is small, peripheral and relatively poor by European standards, students go abroad for multiple reasons not necessarily directly connected with study (eg. family reasons, labour migration); yet their evolving diasporic status is instrumentalised by the Latvian government which wants them to return and contribute to the country's development. Based on 27 in-depth interviews with Latvian students and graduates who have studied abroad, our analysis focuses on three interlinked dimensions of inequality: access to education at home and abroad; the varying prestige of higher education qualifications from different countries and universities; and the inequalities involved in getting recognition of the symbolic and cultural capital that derives from a non-Latvian university. Within a setting of neoliberal globalisation and conflicting messages from the homeland, students and graduates are faced with a challenging dilemma: how to balance their materialistic desire for a decent job and career with their patriotic duty to return to Latvia.

Keywords: Students, Mobility, Diaspora, Neoliberalism, Inequality, Latvia

1.   Introduction

Literature on international student mobility increasingly evokes thinking about the inequalities that are characteristic of this type of migration. First, and among the most salient, are economic inequalities in terms of lack of resources to access education abroad and cover study fees and living expenses (Holloway and Jöns 2012; Raghuram 2013; Wakeling and Jefferies 2013). A second strand of literature emphasises inequalities in the prestige of education, commonly reflected in university rankings and notions of a 'world-class' or a 'good university' (see e.g. Brooks and Waters 2011: 35; Findlay et al. 2012; Tindal et al. 2015). And third, there is evidence of inequalities caused by lack of recognition and the differential valuation of international credentials (see Brooks and Waters 2011; Waters 2009; 2012). All these dimensions of inequality, in reality, are interlinked. For instance, problems in the recognition of diplomas can hinder both access to education abroad and also access to jobs and recognition of the cultural capital of qualifications upon return to a country of origin.

In our case-study about foreign-educated Latvians, we want to further nuance the debate on these three forms of inequality – access to education, prestige, and recognition of cultural capital – through positioning students simultaneously as migrants and as individuals who produce cultural capital that evolves in particular ways during migration (Erel 2010). Furthermore, students abroad are also the potential targets of a small and peripheral nation-state's strategies to promote development through return migration.

Latvia is a rather typical case among other Central and Eastern European countries which have experienced large-scale emigration of, mainly, young people over the past two decades. As Brooks and Waters (2011: 31) have highlighted in the context of international student mobility, 'neoliberalism has encouraged many people to see themselves as "choosers"'. Both student mobility and return migration are strongly imbricated by a neoliberal emphasis on successful individuals who want to develop their careers and to return back to their countries of origin. However, this choice may not be so straightforward in practice. Young people may find themselves caught in the dilemma of self-development abroad and internationally successful futures on the one hand, and peripheriality but 'patriotic' feelings (Billig 1995: 55-59) towards their country of origin, on the other. Yet, it is little understood how individuals navigate themselves through such a process of 'choosing' in the context of the above-described dilemma. Therefore, our main question in this paper is this: How do Latvian students abroad perceive their position in terms of access to education, inequalities in the prestige of higher education institutions as well as inequalities in recognition of their cultural capital, in this dual frame of reference of choosing to study and live abroad or return 'home'?

In the following sections we will, first, provide a context within which foreign-educated young people become positioned as new diaspora members – a trend increasingly found in countries like Latvia where the external population is nowadays called a 'diaspora' instead of 'emigrants' to avoid negative connotations of the latter term. Following van Hear (1998), we will use here the term 'diaspora' in the sense of 'new diasporas' and Brubaker's (2005: 12) notion of diaspora as a 'community of practice'. Second, we will problematise the inequalities of international student mobility with emphasis on migration-specific cultural capital. Then comes a section on methods. The main body of the paper consists of an analysis of three main sections on access to education, prestige, and problems related to the social and cultural recognition of foreign-earned education upon return to Latvia. Finally, in the conclusion we discuss our findings and suggest future avenues of research.

2. Positioning students as young diaspora members

Emigration from Latvia, which started after the country gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, accelerated after the country joined the EU in 2004. More than 300,000 Latvian citizens were residing outside their country in 2014, while Latvia's domestic population had fallen to below 2 million, due to a combination of this emigration and a very low birth-rate (CSB 2015). The large-scale emigration of young people from Eastern European countries is mainly the result of the open border policy that has emerged due to the combination of the disintegration of the block of socialist countries and the enlargement of the European Union. For students, it needs to be noted that international student migration increases at a faster pace than other forms of migration (see Bilecen 2014; Brooks and Waters 2011).

Several emigration states have responded to this trend by paying increasing attention to their external population through new diaspora initiatives, especially towards the young and educated. In Latvia, this is reflected in diaspora policy documents, aimed at forging ties with educated Latvians permanently living abroad (e.g. MFA 2013). The government's Return Migration Support Plan, for example, prioritises the return of highly skilled people (MoE 2012). In 2015, this return policy initiative was specifically targeting diaspora youth who obtained higher education abroad, offering work placements at state institutions (State Chancellery 2015). Through such policies, Latvian students abroad become strategically positioned as diaspora members and this positioning has certain implications, such as a sense of obligation towards the country of origin. We will therefore

need to trace down these in relation to our informants' individual plans for their personal development.

'Young diaspora' initiatives are by no means unique to Latvia. Examples from other countries include the development of summer schools for Polish youth (FEPS 2014), the Lithuanian global youth leaders programme and work placement programme for young Lithuanian graduates from foreign universities (LT 2015; Kurk Lietuvai 2014), or Romania's initiative to become an attractive 'brain region' with the help of diaspora youth (SMART Diaspora 2013). These recent examples show how emigrant states tap into the human capital of the young and talented, forging both diasporic ties and a desire to return. Such strategies establish a specific discourse of return: return is successful for those who are resourceful, confident and proactive. In a study of the return migration of highly skilled Lithuanians, Barcevičius (2015: 9) found that most high qualified returnees tend to be 'pro-active, self-confident, and ambitious in their job-search effort as compared to the Lithuanian population at large'. Foreign-educated returning Lithuanians are also more prone to self-employment and entrepreneurship. Such findings are highly illustrative of neoliberal ideas of study abroad and return that emphasise market-oriented individuals, who are themselves responsible for the successful validation of their cultural capital upon return to their country of origin. Barcevičius (2015) also rightly points out that such a profile of highly skilled returnees can be self-selective and, therefore, in a sense, biased, since the voices of those who did not return remain unheard. In our study of Latvian students and graduates, we overcome this risk of bias by surveying both returnees and those still abroad.

Ho et al. (2015) and Larner (2015: 204) highlight that diaspora strategies, if uncritically celebrated, can perpetuate inequalities, especially due to the selectivity inherent in emigration and study abroad and the neoliberal emphasis that shifts the responsibility for social transformation onto individuals. Thus, our research focuses on the heterogeneous nature of diaspora youth in order to broaden our understanding of the inequalities within contemporary European nation-states (Smith and Gergan 2015). As pointed out already, we will provide the voices of both those who have returned and those who have not, in order to probe deeper into the inequalities they perceive as preventing them from returning to Latvia. We need to know whether Latvian students abroad feel somehow 'responsible' to return to Latvia and whether they display a sense of 'patriotic duty' to the Latvian state or society at large.

Furthermore, positioning students as members of an evolving extra-territorial population of a nation-state corresponds with the broader migration realities of young

Eastern and Central Europeans. Study abroad may not have always been their initial aim of emigration because international mobility for studies, work or family reasons become mixed. For instance, in her research on Romanian and Bulgarian students in the UK and Spain, Marcu (2015) found that student mobility could be used as an element to diversify personal development strategies: as a means of achieving permanent migration, as a tool for competition, as well as for a successful return home in the future. Being enrolled in higher education institutions abroad does not necessarily mean that the initial purpose of migration was study abroad. This was also confirmed by a recent study which surveyed 1,000 Latvian students abroad, revealing that only about one third of those who were studying at the bachelors level left Latvia with the initial intention of studying abroad (Kasa 2015). Instead, employment was their main motivation for emigrating, and the inability to find a good job in Latvia prevents students from returning.

3.   Inequalities of student migration and migration-specific cultural capital

Umut Erel (2010: 643) argues that 'migrants exercise agency by creating new forms of *migration-specific cultural capital*' (her emphasis). In Bourdieu's (1984; 1993) theories, the formation of specific forms of capital within broader realms of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals cannot be separated from an understanding of society as constituted by overlapping *fields* and lived through certain *habitus*. Fields, or, a more encompassing notion, social spaces, are constituted by specific power relations and struggles to achieve access to certain forms of capital (Bourdieu 1989). Fields are characterised by specific goals, shared beliefs, norms and logic (Bourdieu 1993: 72-76). Latvian students abroad are simultaneously positioned in two fields: as 'students' and as 'being from Latvia'. Thus, the international education space and the diasporic position of a student are interwoven with symbolic power relations that may have potentially conflicting norms and logics in the validation of cultural capital. This leads them to exercising their agency in both fields and to a 'conscious or intuitive prioritising of certain dispositions and practices' by taking into account structural conditions (Kelly and Lusis 2006: 833).

Habitus sets a context within which various forms of capital are specifically valued and given meaning. For example, cultural capital in the form of a degree from a certain country or university has a relative value in different places (Waters 2009). Similarly, 'patriotic' meanings within a nation-state or a diaspora community have different meanings elsewhere, and

ethnically selective diaspora ideologies may fail to stir such sentiments (Kosmarskaya 2011; Morawska 2011). Moreover, habitus, understood as the 'totality of environment and social influences' (Waters and Brooks 2010: 221) as well as 'practical knowledge of one's place within a field' (Borlagdan 2015: 841), has both personal and collective qualities, 'which shape the value that individuals place on practices, and, therefore, on various forms of capital' (Kelly and Lusis 2006: 834-835). Through habitus we can specify the tensions between the positionalities of being 'a student' and 'being from Latvia'.

Most importantly, migration-specific capital involves transformative elements (Erel 2010). First, in terms of access to education and, upon the return to the country of origin, access to work, we have to focus on the transformative norms and value given to a specific form of cultural capital – a degree from abroad. As Burbules and Torres (2000: 92) have argued, focusing on internationalised higher education is particularly useful for tracing the creation and transformation of diasporic spaces. Compared to other forms of migration such as labour migration or refugee movements, international student migration is a privileged form of mobility because higher education institutions compete for those with the best potential to develop cultural capital (Chaloff and Lemaître 2009), even paying for the mobility of some students by offering grants and scholarships. However, students' personal accounts of access to education and work from a dual optic of student migration and diasporic position may reveal inequalities that challenge this notion of privileged migration.

Second, through this dual position of our informants, we can trace symbolic power in the form of the prestige perceived through a specific logic such as university rankings or certain cities and countries that facilitate the accumulation of cultural capital (see also King et al. 2014). These, too, carry inherited inequalities. As Brooks and Waters (2011: 35) have highlighted, increased mobility in the EU is likely to benefit affluent countries and prestigious universities. The geographical unevenness of higher education mirrors pre-existing power relations and the academically hegemonic role of the English language. Taking the case of England and Scotland, Tindal et al. (2015) demonstrate that students are attracted to 'good' universities, or, in other words, those educational institutions which hold a globally recognised reputation for high-quality education. Educational choices can also be driven by social, economic, and lifestyle factors, and can be used as a stepping-stone for developing a cosmopolitan identity (Tindal et al. 2015: 98). Finally, understanding these inequalities and the relative value of prestige can be re-evaluated in the light of return migration.

Third, when it comes to recognition of cultural capital, nation-states can formally protect their labour markets by not giving official recognition to foreign credentials (Bauder 2003), and this can also apply to foreign-educated nationals, e.g. return migrants. But more importantly,

informal barriers to recognition can also play a decisive role: other criteria, such as specific local experience for accessing jobs or social capital, including the vital role of personal recommendations, can be introduced despite formal recognition (Erel 2010: 648, cf. Hage 1998).

All these three forms of inequality put into question both idealised students' expectations that prestigious foreign diplomas would carry a symbolic capital also back home, as well as neoliberal constructions of return migration as desirable projects for successful and resourceful individuals. Studying abroad is an important life transition, which may include the processes of family formation and intimate relationships, as well as the initiation or intersection of working life (Ryan and Mulholland 2014). Moreover, as several studies have demonstrated, in the context of Eastern European migrants in Western countries, educated and student youth also engage in low-paid, precarious jobs where labour and student migration overlap or shift in a non-sequential manner (e.g. Hadgrove et al. 2015).

4.   Methods

The present paper forms part of a larger ongoing project on Latvian students and the 'new' student and graduate diaspora, carried out in 2015. The study adopted a mixed-method design: an internet-based questionnaire (n=307) with the practical aim of obtaining pilot data on the spatial trajectories and linkages of students and graduates with institutions in Latvia and return migration motivations; and an accompanying in-depth interview survey designed to gather qualitative insights about the social and geographical mobilities of Latvian students and graduates abroad. The results presented in this paper originate mainly from the qualitative part of the project, consisting of 27 interviews with Latvian students who have experience of higher education in one of three regionally different destinations: the UK, the US, or the Nordic countries. The United Kingdom is the main destination for Latvian emigration and study, while the Nordic countries are on a more recent and fast-developing trajectory for student migration as there are (usually) no fees required for students to gain a study place at university there. The US is the most attractive destination for students wishing to study outside the EU (Altbach 2004; Beine et al. 2014; Tung 2008).

Interviewees were primarily recruited as a sub-sample from the internet survey, in which they could indicate their agreement to participate in an interview. Additional interviewees were reached by snowballing according to the following criteria. First, respondents should still be

studying or should have completed their full-time higher education programmes outside Latvia no later than 2009. Second, we were interested in surveying not only those who left Latvia with the explicit purpose of studying but also those who left for other reasons, such as emigration with their families as children or adolescents, labour migration, or love migration. Such diversification was crucial in order to represent the actually existing diversity of educated Latvian diaspora youth abroad. Third, we included students at the Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD levels in order to trace the various transitions students make during their studies and geographical trajectories. Slightly more women were interviewed. We explain this by reference to three factors. First, researcher's positionality: we are women. Second, there is clear evidence that women are more inclined to participate in scientific research, and hence more willing to give interviews than men (Galea and Tracy 2007: 647). Third, women constitute a roughly two-thirds majority of the Latvian third-level student population, and are equally a majority in the study-abroad population. The median age of the student and graduate respondents was 26 years. On average, the interviews lasted for one hour and were conducted in the language preferred by the respondent (Latvian, English or Russian). All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent. Names quoted in this paper are pseudonyms.

 The semi-structured interview method (Bernard 2006; Corbetta 2003) was used both to cover certain chosen topics and to allow free conversation and interpretation. We paid special attention to how our respondents assigned subjective meaning to and perceived the interconnections between cultural capital and their individual geographical trajectories. We also paid special attention to the students' experience of becoming a diaspora member and their blending into diaspora organisations. At the centre of our interest were unequal opportunities and the students' negotiations for accumulating cultural capital in various places in relation to the broader experience of life transitions.

We now present the empirical findings of our research, organised under the three types of inequality specified earlier, namely inequalities in accessing higher education, inequalities in 'prestige' deriving from studying abroad, and inequalities in the recognition of the cultural capital of 'foreign' qualifications.

5.   Inequalities of access to education

In 1995, 55% of study places in Latvian higher education institutions (HEIs) were state funded, while 45% of students funded their studies privately. However, in 2002 and 2003, just before

the country joined the EU, only 21% of HEI places were funded by the state budget. HEIs remained highly commercialised in terms of the proportion of self-funded students until the onset of the economic crisis in 2008. However, in 2009 the proportion of state-funded study places rose to 37% and it reached 42% of all study places in the 2015/2016 academic year (MoES 2016: 7). On the other hand, the numbers of student admissions also plummeted significantly at the beginning of the economic crisis – from 32,792 in 2008/2009 to 24,371 in the following academic year. With slight fluctuations, the numbers of annual student admissions continued to decrease and only 22,073 students were admitted to Latvian HEIs in 2015/2016.

Against this backdrop that state-funded scholarships in any case do not cover basic needs, and that loans to cover study and living costs are difficult to access and are bound to interest payments of up to 5% per year (Regulations 220 2001), studying elsewhere in Europe becomes a viable option, especially because the EU provides significant privileges for its citizens as they can both work and study in all EU countries under the same circumstances as they would at home.

At the time of the interview, Elina (age 19) was a Bachelor's student in Denmark. She originally comes from a small town in northern Latvia. 'I chose Denmark because there is no university in my town, so I had to move anyway', she justified. Another young respondent, Katrina (25), tried but did not secure a state-funded study placement in Latvia after completing her Bachelor studies in Riga. 'It was a logical decision to go to Denmark, because I did not have to pay for studies there'. Denmark, compared to other Nordic countries, has been the most visible in the regional higher education market in recent years and broadly advertises many study opportunities in English, targeted at potential students from Latvia.

Sanita (27) is an example of a recent labour migrant who ended up studying abroad. During the interview, Sanita stressed that she did not study in Latvia because she could not pay for her studies herself and did not want to use up her mother's last savings. After finishing secondary school and a short working experience in Latvia, she went to the United Kingdom to look for better-paid work. She worked in a hotel for three years until she met her future husband, a Dutch national visiting from Denmark. The newly-formed family wanted to settle in the place they imagined to be the best environment for raising children, and moved to Denmark. Because of her family responsibilities and limited proficiency in Danish, Sanita did not immediately enter the labour market, but instead started a degree in hospitality studies in Denmark, available for free and in English.

These three cases demonstrate how relatively open borders diversify the possibilities for Latvian students to study abroad. For Elina, there was not much difference between moving to the capital city of Riga and moving abroad. For Karina the issue was study fees in Riga while for Sanita, enrolment in higher education took place after she had already gained experience in the labour market and formed a family. The decision to move to Denmark was initially guided by her relationship and only later, because of the free enrolment and the availability of a degree programme in English, she became a student.

What we can infer from these experiences is precisely the warning by Burbules and Torres (2000: 248) that, due to the increasing commercialisation of European universities, public education institutions lose their democratic function to tackle social inequalities. In our case, these are inequalities back home that push people to hit the road and access education abroad. In the examples cited above, these are economic and regional inequalities, as the expense of studying in Riga was perceived as not worthwhile and Elina chose to study for free and obtain a loan for the costs of living abroad. Individual strategies to tackle these inequalities can involve years of working before a solution is found on how to access education.

However, students also reveal recognition-related inequalities that hinder access to education in Latvia. Roberts, 21, obtained his Bachelor degree in the UK, and wanted to do his Master's in Riga. He got rejected from both universities he applied to in Latvia. The first one explained that they cannot accept his three-year Bachelor degree and require four years of undergraduate education (as in Latvia), while the other university rejected him on the formality of not having his diploma in a printed version during the application process. Here is the relevant section of the interview with Roberts:

> I decided to apply for University of Latvia. I had filled in my application, I go to the admissions office. And they are like: 'Do you have your diploma ready?' I said: 'No, I am getting it at the end of the month.' And they said: 'Well, come back to us when you get it'. But the application process would have closed then. And that kind of upset me because I was like, well I have a first-class degree, I would be paying for my studies, so why don't you just accept my application now? And I can prove that I have it, because I have the transcript, it is just not an official paper yet. [..] So I decided to look through Master's degrees that they offered in the UK and had the scholarship too. [..] I was considering Oxford, Cambridge, Kings College, University College London and Edinburgh. Because all of these are respected universities. I was like – OK, Roberts, you have a good degree so why don't you just go for something high? (Roberts, 21, Bachelor, UK)

All these examples illustrate how the fundamental nature of the process of applying for higher education matters nationally, whilst the free movement rights in the EU provides wider opportunities for studying abroad, sometimes for free. But Roberts' example also captures the conflict between his diasporic position – he wanted to return to Latvia – and how a formalistic rejection by Latvian universities provoked him to put a stronger emphasis on personal development and the value of a 'prestigious' degree, which is the focus of our next section.

6. Inequality of 'prestige'

University rankings create the strongest perceptions of what a prestigious education is and where it could be obtained. According to Shapiro (2009: 262), 'prestige is the capitalist form of status and collective charisma'. Ranking lists are regularly circulated to attract more cultural capital but the top universities and countries rarely change (Brooks and Waters 2011). These lists, that reproduce inequalities in cultural capital and potential of growth, are nevertheless consulted carefully when choosing education abroad. Although being confident that in Latvia she could get easily compete for a state-funded place in Latvia, Inguna (23) consciously prepared for her studies in the UK, but only if she could get into a relatively 'good' university:

> I chose my university by the ranking, I took off the list those top universities which I would really not be able to get in and those about which I thought – there is no reason to go abroad, it is better to pay nothing and stay in Latvia. So if I don't get into this particular range of universities it is cheaper and more reasonable to stay and study in Latvia. Well, I felt like a child in a candy store when I was contemplating the university programmes. As it was all so thrilling and interesting (Inguna, 23, Master, UK).

She got a place in one of the relatively highly ranked universities in Southern England and also did her graduate studies there. The University of Latvia, the main university in the country, appeared in the *Quacquarelli Symonds* (Q S n.d.) rankings for the first time only in 2013, placed among the top 701-800 universities. Rankings and the scientific quality of particular disciplines became a concern for those informants who had either already studied abroad or who received this information from their friends who studied abroad.

For example, Gatis, a 26-years-old PhD student, moved to the US when he was six because his father obtained a research job at a university there. Being raised in a diasporic habitus where return to Latvia is among the fundamental values, he said he 'considered the possibility of studying in Latvia' after finishing high school in the US. But then he decided in favour of a US degree because 'all that relocation to the US by my dad was to secure better education for his children'. Furthermore, he continued:

> It would be *so great* [emphasised] to study in Latvia, but the level of scientific excellence is just too low; there are only three international publications amongst the top 10 scientists in my field in Latvia (Gatis, 26, PhD, US).

He clearly prioritised the accumulation of a specific form of research-oriented cultural capital over return to Latvia, and yet Gatis still put an idealised emphasis on life in Latvia as a value.

Similarly, Roberts, whom we introduced in the previous section and who obtained almost all of his education outside of Latvia and did his Bachelor degree in the UK, also talked about his dilemma of return versus a 'good' diploma. Roberts explains his trajectory and study choices as follows:

> I did my primary education and also secondary education in the UK. Then I was thinking, where I should get my bachelor's degree, in the UK or in Latvia? Because my aim is to return back home [to Latvia]. The British education system is very international and of high quality, so I just decided to stay here (Roberts, 21, UK).

Although he initially planned to return to Latvia and he still calls Latvia his home, after the formalistic rejection by Latvian universities, he revisited his values again and prioritised a 'prestigious' university in London, that also provides a full scholarship, over remaining in Latvia.

Solving the dilemma of the trade-off between a prestigious diploma and the perceived moral obligations towards Latvia constitutes an existential and economic decision which extends beyond the simple dichotomies of emigration and return. Students studying abroad regularly visit Latvia, they choose study topics related to Latvia or the Baltic region when studying in their country of destination, especially those in the social sciences or arts, and they often choose to conduct fieldwork in Latvia or apply for work placements back in Latvia, even if such a relatively little-known country is not seen as an important or a fashionable topic of inquiry.

Furthermore, several respondents were actively looking for research partners at Latvian universities. The migration-specific capital here was validated through the ideals of the

transnational academic space, which emphasises connectedness, consortium-building, and knowledge transfer. This can be used either in combination with internships or separately, as in the following case described by Janis (26), another PhD student in the US:

> I had a great deal of freedom where I could undertake an internship, and so an opportunity to go to Latvia for two summers came up. I made contacts with specialists in my study field and these were further developed with one of my professors in the US. We invited a professor from Daugavpils [a regional town in Latvia] to give guest lectures in the US (Janis, 26, PhD, US).

It should be noted that, in his narrative, Janis did not relate this practice to return; on the contrary, his embeddedness in the US provided a mechanism for his migration-specific cultural capital to be validated for him. Also, by being located in the US, he could help other Latvians from Latvia to obtain a transnational experience in a university in the US as he was in a position to invite a visiting professor to the US and he chose to invite a Latvian person. A strategy to help somebody else from academia in Latvia served as a way of mediating between the dilemma of being a research student at a prestigious university and being a 'responsible' migrant from Latvia.

7. Inequalities of recognition

Rethinking the return is intrinsically related to the idea of not returning and to disillusionment: the participants expressed the feeling that their cultural capital is not valued in Latvia and they voiced harsh criticism towards what they perceived as a discriminatory and exclusionary selectivity of 'valued' returnees. Those who studied abroad usually have fewer and weaker social networks back in Latvia, which prevents them from converting their cultural capital into economic capital – specifically, good jobs. Furthermore, the cultural capital acquired during other life experiences abroad, such as everyday exposure to diversity, tolerance and social justice (Holloway and Jöns 2012: 483), featured prominently in their discussions around the topic of return. Respondents were, rather, prioritising the idea of their future mobilities elsewhere, utilising their cultural capital in the search for good opportunities globally wherever they might present themselves.

According to the interviewees, the biggest obstacles to return are Latvia's small economy and the lack of workplaces for the highly skilled, especially those who have a PhD degree. Although some nurtured an idealistic perception that a degree from a foreign university

could constitute additional cultural and human capital in Latvia, others, who had a direct experience of return or based their judgements on friends' experiences, expressed their concerns that a foreign degree and specialisation might instead actually make it more difficult to get a job in Latvia due to cronyism at local institutions and the lack of open competition. However, some did obtain a job in a profession without prior social contacts, although examples like 21-year-old Arta were the exception rather than the rule.

> When I decided that it was time to get a job I was pretty lucky. The company I work for took me pretty quickly. If you have the right attitude and the right skills and you are applying for an opening for which you qualify, then it's easy. People say it's hard to find a job. They might be looking in the wrong place or having different expectations (Arta, 21, Bachelor, UK).

Arta embodies an 'ideal returnee' and, despite having a degree from a famous Scottish university, she did not emphasise the possible distinctiveness of her foreign-earned cultural capital. She positioned herself rather as an ordinary young Latvian with the 'right attitude and the right skills' (in her case – specifically technical skills) and no additional need to capitalise on her foreign degree. She prioritised a patriotic return to Latvia and rationalised the other gains she can now enjoy in Riga – a vibrant city, lively cultural life and cheaper living compared to UK cities.

Here we can draw on the insightful work of Johanna Waters (2009; 2012), who demonstrated the important role of place-based social capital in the recognition and evaluation of international academic credentials. For some, the informal non-recognition and devaluation of the cultural capital they thought would be valuable (a degree from a 'good' university) was a major challenge. They were also aware of the negative impact of social capital; namely, that social circles in Latvia are rather closed and characterised by a lack of meritocracy. This creates unequal opportunities for the conversion of cultural capital into jobs, since those outside of a particular social circle have less possibility to compete and to resist appointment practices where merit and open competition are undermined. The result, again, is a tendency to prioritise an international career over the homeland return. In the meantime, young graduates actively sought to create their own workplaces and seek temporary, intensive work engagements in Latvia as part of the normal state of a graduate's life that corresponds with Barcevičius' (2015) findings about pro-active returnees. For example, Laura (25), a Master's student in the US, stated the following:

> I came back and I was actively working in an NGO and various projects related to fundraising for those young Latvians who want to study abroad in a similar scheme

as I did. My partner is Latvian, but from the Latvian diaspora in Germany. We are currently in the process of moving to Germany. (...) We [Latvia, as a country] should stop being afraid of letting people go. I returned because there [in Latvia] were many great initiatives and I wanted to be a part of all this. The fact that I am leaving now *does not mean that I would not come back* [emphasised] (Laura, 25, Master, US).

As we can be seen in this quote, Laura came back to Latvia, gained work experience, raised funds for other potential students who wanted to study abroad, and, due to family reasons, she was planning to move away again. She also actively challenged the narrow meaning of the return as a unidirectional action only.

Since return is often closely related to the transition from education to work, the critique extends especially to recruitment practices, which are often based on informal social networks. Several informants reported that they applied for or inquired after many jobs in Latvia, but did not even receive a formal response or were unable to attend interviews due to the inflexibility of employers in Latvia. The case of Guntra, a 29-year-old Master student in Denmark, illustrates this situation:

A job in Latvia was my priority. I did apply for several positions and was shortlisted three times. But the ministries [potential employers] did not accept a Skype interview, they asked me to come in person and usually it was announced just few days before the interview. As a student, I simply could not afford to buy flight tickets at such a short notice (Guntra, 29, Master, Demark).

Several respondents emphasised the necessity of knowing someone in Latvia who could help them get a job or give a recommendation. Although Latvians abroad still have knowledge about Latvian systems and speak Latvian fluently, the conversion of the cultural capital they gained abroad into jobs at home did not prove easy, as they were often considered as 'others' in their home country due to the very fact that a person has been (or still is at the time of recruitment) away from home institutions and localised social capital. Some students envisioned a return after several years. They wanted to prolong their stay abroad in order to earn more money to help them get a better professional start in Latvia. This future scenario not only places students abroad closer to the typical responses of Latvian labour migrants in their future imaginations, but also reiterates the weight of economic inequalities that foreign-accumulated cultural capital alone cannot eliminate. Hence, only those who are 'resource-ful' or, in other words, have access to economic, social and cultural resources (Allen et al. 2013: 433-434) can afford to experiment with their return.

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The conversion of cultural capital into economic gains also remains one of the main worries for those who do not want to return or who may re-emigrate after some time. Another worry that emerged from some of the interviews was the extra barrier of 'acceptability' placed against those Latvians of Russian origin, who are somewhat marginalised in post-independence Latvia. Our interviewees thus critically engaged with 'ethnicity' as a category of exclusion.

> I'm not a Latvian by origin. We always hear that we [Latvian state] want only Latvians to return to Latvia, but not the Russians. It's not that we don't want them, we just don't mention them. I feel more free here. I am a voluntary migrant here, but in Latvia people tend to see me a migrant although I am a second-generation-born Latvian citizen (Irina, 25, Bachelor, UK).

Studies away from home usually took place in multicultural settings. This was in contrast with Latvia's highly sensitised narratives on ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers, despite the fact that Russian youth do feel that they belong to Latvia to a high degree (Birka 2015). This ultimately problematises the question of students' ability to claim their foreign-earned degree in Latvia as valuable if they themselves are not ethnic Latvians. Ethnic essentialism, therefore, was seen as a critical barrier in Latvia. In the long run this is true also for foreign-educated 'ethnic Latvians', because foreign experience and, possibly, having a foreign-born partner hampers a person's ability to fit smoothly into various spheres of life, as Gunita, PhD student in the US, explained:

> The most important challenge for Latvia is to become an attractive destination for the highly skilled, both those of Latvian origin and foreigners. If a Latvian who has studied abroad is married to a foreigner and both want to develop their professional careers, Latvia should be an attractive destination for both of them (Gunita, 30, US, PhD).

In sum, the actual or imagined return of those who have earned a foreign degree reveal inequalities in a different light. First, the lack of transparent structures in the labour market and the bureaucratic obstacles to recognition of foreign degrees as legitimate and valuable prevent returns to Latvia from taking place. Besides, the conflict between what is perceived and idealised as the symbolic 'global' value of a good degree is highly relative back home if a person lack social networks. Sin (2013), who researched the value of UK international education obtained in Malaysia, argues that the possible negative value of foreign cultural capital still remains under-researched. Local capital, when entering into the national labour market, often holds more functional importance and thus can offer better economic

opportunities locally (Sin 2013: 860). Second, return therefore can indeed perpetuate inequalities, as those who are 'resource-ful' – having economic resources and contacts (Allen et al 2013) can activate their cultural capital back home and access jobs or launch their own activities. Thus, resourcefulness and pro-activeness that is expected form returnees are capital-enabled. Or, as Gale and Parker (2015: 93) put it: 'the constraints of structure are not simply addressed by adding accounts of agency'.

8.   Conclusions

In this paper, we have aspired to contribute to two strands of literature, namely those on international student mobility and on evolving 'new' or 'young' diasporas, using Latvia as a case study. We achieved this through positioning the research participants simultaneously as international students/graduates and also as subjects of return migration initiatives that are closely linked with ideas about diasporas in Eastern Europe.

From the point of view of international student mobility, we chose to deconstruct the category of a 'student abroad'. Due to large-scale emigration, young adults from Latvia living abroad are a heterogeneous group: some left Latvia as children, for others the decision to emigrate was related to their study plans, while others emigrated for different reasons, such as labour migration or a romantic attachment to a significant other. In this study their common denominator was their study-abroad situation.

Our analysis of this dual positionality as students and young members of an emerging diaspora has been set within a broader theoretical context of neoliberal globalisation, which constructs students who study abroad as 'neoliberal subjects' (Brooks and Waters 2011: 3; Rizvi and Lindgard 2010: 32). However, partly reflecting the tensions and contradictions within globalisation, foreign-educated students and graduates have been shown to face multiple inequalities and dilemmas. The key dilemma is between studying and staying abroad to maximise economic and career benefits, and return home as a patriotic duty; but here there is a further contradiction between an official rhetoric of encouraging a 'productive return' of highly-educated young Latvians, and the realities of the problems they face when they do try to return and develop themselves and their country. The inequalities that we have analysed in the main body of the article have been threefold.

First, economic inequality was visible in the context of access to higher education. Differences in course fees (including the possibility of studying for free) and access to loans clearly influence options of where to study. Study abroad, at least for some, is not a privileged choice

(Chaloff and Lemaître 2009) but rather a viable alternative if securing a state-funded place in Latvia fails. Inequalities of access to education are also bureaucratic: inflexibility in admission procedures obstruct prompt access to Latvian universities by those who have not received a Latvian-issued diploma, as in the case of Roberts. Therefore, cultural capital is turned into a form of 'national' capital (Erel 2010: 648). We feel that further research is needed on the inequalities which occur as a result of the incompatibility of international-level achievements from globally recognised universities and the practical requirements apparently demanded by national-level universities such as the HEI system in Latvia. Research is especially needed on the way this non-conformity hinders the return migration of the young and skilled.

Second, inequalities were discussed in terms of the prestige and quality of education. The symbolic value of a degree from a prestigious university is a salient element of the globalised habitus of transnational academic space, publicised and circulated regularly in university rankings. For those informants who prioritised personal development over return to Latvia, the reputation of the university they had studied at was relevant. These careerists tended to favour an international education over an institution in Latvia. However, some informants also recognised that the symbolic capital of a prestigious foreign degree can have a relative value back in Latvia that reflects some of the power dynamics that are commonly experienced in core-periphery situations.

Third, in terms of the recognition of a foreign-earned degree, we concord with Waters (2009; 2010) and Sin (2013) on the importance of localised interpretations and hence on the relative and even negative value of foreign-earned cultural capital. Studying abroad also shapes new inequalities, as students who wish to return experience significant problems with the transition to the labour market, particularly as they do not possess the 'right contacts'; in other words, local-based social capital. Therefore, more empirical examples on how the cultivation of other forms of capital during studies abroad could improve the status of cultural capital upon return could yield important practical results.

The norm of return migration of Latvian youth strongly featured in informants' dual position of being 'students', and 'being from Latvia'. They were aware that becoming highly skilled made them potentially valuable for the emigration-depleted country. However, informants also recognised that their return was often constrained due to the small scale of the labour market for specialised jobs and the nature of recruitment practices in their home country. Moreover, they especially raised their voices against ethnic inequalities, which privilege the ethno-nationalistic membership of 'valued' returnees, namely ethnic Latvians. An uncritical emphasis on the idealised proactive international student and simultaneously resourceful and valued returnee can perpetuate inequalities within and across nations, as Ho et al. (2015) and Larner

(2015) have warned. If we observe both processes – student migration and 'new' diaspora formation – simultaneously, we also need to ask a question about the morality of encouraging return migration with lack of structural support. Moreover, returnees who do succeed, through self-promotion and whatever other means ('luck', 'connections' etc.), contribute to a collective habitus which juxtaposes 'success' and 'neoliberal enterprise' against a population which continues to be impoverished by the effects of economic crisis and emigration.

Finally, it should be remarked the findings presented here are based on a qualitative sample and hence cannot be generalised. Future quantitative and comparative approaches in countries with large-scale emigration and return migration, or diaspora initiatives for students and graduates, would yield important insights into student and return migrant dilemmas.

Acknowledgement

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