

## **Study abroad: opportunity for all, or the privilege of a few?**

**Zoltán Leczkési (University of Economics, Prague)**

### **Abstract**

This article aims to provide some information about the influence of socioeconomic background and citizenship on the chance to study abroad both at secondary and higher education level. It explains why study abroad programs are beneficial for students, why do employers seek students with international experiences and why is it extremely important to fund such programs. It also shows that without the right citizenship studying abroad can be quite complicated, and by introducing other articles it confirms the influence of financial background as a key factor in the chances to attend such programs. In the end the author introduces some ideas which can help to make study abroad programs achievable for more students. The research and conclusions stated in this article are based on online resources, publications, articles, databases, consulting with people familiar with the topic and the author's personal experience gained while attending a study abroad program in the USA.

**Key words:** study abroad programs, higher education, secondary education, citizenship, socioeconomic background, financial background

### **Introduction**

Study abroad programs are becoming year after year more popular. There is a wide variety of options to choose from and in some cases it is even slowly becoming an expectation from employers. It would appear that participating in an overseas study program is easier than ever before, but is that true for everyone, regardless of nationality or financial background?

Three years ago, I had the opportunity to spend 10 months in the United States as an exchange student where I gained a lot of experience and made many friends including one called Mauro. He had excellent grades and strong English skills. Sadly, it will take much more effort for him to take advantage of his talents. The reason for this is that Mauro is from Mozambique and he does not have the same financial background and opportunities as a student from a developed country. How does this effect his studies?

Firstly, the way we got into the program was different. While he had to compete with hundreds of students for the few available spots, I was lucky enough to be born into a family

able to finance my studies. Secondly, when he got home, he tried to attend a university locally for the first year, but he soon realized that he would be offered a better education abroad, which comes at a price he cannot afford. Right now, he studies at a college in Mozambique, and hopes that he will be good enough to get a decent job or another scholarship. His story made me wonder how much of a difference could people like Mauro make worldwide if only they had a chance.

### **Secondary education benefits of study abroad programs**

First of all, let us examine the advantages of studying abroad. Study abroad programs even at a secondary school level have a significant impact on students' later life and studies alike. As stated in a survey conducted on 3000 participants in 2014 by the Institute of Geography study abroad leads to a more cosmopolitan world view, plays a key role in advancing transnational societies and most important, student mobility reproduces itself. Fifty-five percent of high school exchange program participants also studied abroad while at university.<sup>1</sup>

### **Higher education benefits of study abroad programs**

As for higher education, Erasmus+ Programme is a European funding program offering university students a possibility of studying or doing an internship abroad in another country. It is one of the most popular programs in Europe with more than 9 million participants since 1987. Being an alumnus of this program can provide a serious edge in the labor market. For example: participants are twice as likely to get a job a year after graduation, they tend to earn 25% more at their first job, 9 out of 10 students improve their language skills.<sup>2</sup>

With advancing internationalization and gigantic multinational corporations, there is clearly a need for a common language for employers and employees alike, in order to be able to communicate in the organization. Study abroad programs can significantly improve students' language skills<sup>3</sup> which is crucial for working effectively in international teams. Moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> Weichbrodt, M. (2014). Learning mobility: high-school exchange programs as a part of transnational mobility. *Children's Geographies*, 12(1), 9-24. doi:10.1080/14733285.2013.850852

<sup>2</sup> Erasmus Programme. (2017). Retrieved from <https://esn.org/erasmus>

<sup>3</sup> B.F. Freed (1998). An Overview of Issues and Research in Language Learning in a Study Abroad Setting. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, vol. 4 p. 50

many students have to step out from their comfort zone and learn to be more self-reliant which is a quality that many employers seek. Participation in such programs is definitely a plus in the eyes of the employers and it certainly looks great on a CV.

### **Factors effecting chances to attend a study abroad program at higher education level**

In this paper we are going to discuss the socioeconomic factors and citizenship as the two of the most significant factors in making the decision to study abroad. Of course, other factors like relationships in the family, risk-taking, willingness to step out from the comfort zone or urge to learn about other cultures can play a key role as well. However, the previously mentioned factors are all individual, while socioeconomic background and citizenship are in most cases given whether an individual wants to study abroad or not.

Citizenship is issued to everyone at the moment of birth by the country where the person is born. It can be changed in certain cases, but it is not typical for the majority of the population. Each country has its own education agenda which can differentiate a lot, so if you do not have the right citizenship, your options may be severely limited. If you were born in one of the member states of the European Union or European Economic Area<sup>4</sup>, you have a wide variety of choices regarding education. There are no tuition fees for EU citizens at public universities in Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Germany, etc. In other states like Spain, Italy or Belgium there are some fees but for member states they are the same as for domestic students<sup>5</sup>. In addition to that, the previously mentioned Erasmus+ program provides you with some money while studying abroad, and for a semester or two lets you study abroad at one of your university's partner institutions without a charge. If your expenses are still high, it is easier to get a part-time job for some extra money because in most cases you do not have to bother with working permits and visas. In the Czech Republic it is quite common to study abroad this way, the universities provide you with a lot of help, advice and even financial support. The

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<sup>4</sup> The EEA includes EU countries and also Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. It allows them to be part of the EU's single market. Switzerland is neither an EU nor EEA member but is part of the single market - this means Swiss nationals have the same rights to live and work in the UK as other EEA nationals.

<sup>5</sup> Tucker, L. (2018). Where Can You Study Abroad for Free? Retrieved from <https://www.topuniversities.com/student-info/studying-abroad/where-can-you-study-abroad-free>

previous year my school even had some unfilled spots. So basically, they still had room for more participants.<sup>6</sup>

Country	Tuition fee for students from EU/EEA (per year)	Tuition fee for students from other countries (per year)
Austria	Free	ca. 1,500 EUR
Denmark	Free	45,000 - 120,000 DKK (6,000 - 16,000 EUR)
Finland	Free	5,000 - 20,000 EUR
France	Free	Free
Germany	Free	Free
Greece	Free	ca. 1,500 EUR
Hungary	Free	ca. 1,500 EUR
Iceland	Free	Free
Norway	Free	Free
Poland	Free	ca. 2,000 EUR
Slovenia	Free	ca. 5,000 EUR

<sup>6</sup> University of Economics in Prague [www.vse.cz](http://www.vse.cz). (2017). Oddělení zahraničních styků VŠE v Praze . Retrieved from <http://ozs.vse.cz/download/dokumenty-ke-stazeni/>

Country	Tuition fee for students from EU/EEA (per year)	Tuition fee for students from other countries (per year)
Sweden	Free	80,000 - 200,000 SEK (8,300 - 20,800 EUR)

Figure 1 Tuition fees for EU and EEA members<sup>7</sup>

One or two semester long exchange programs are rare at higher education level in Mozambique. According to Mauro Antonio Cumbe studying at Eduardo Mondlane University the common way to study abroad is to apply directly to a foreign university and try to get a scholarship. However, the selection process can be a bit shady. On the one hand, the selection process for scholarships offered by international non-profit organizations, or embassies is based on skill and talent<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, scholarships offered by the government are practically unachievable without connections<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, repeatedly applying for scholarships maybe tricky because some of them demand proof of residence, which would mean having to prove one has not left the country during the previous two or three years.

At public schools in Iceland, Norway in most of Germany and France tuition fees are minimal, regardless of nationality. On the other hand, living expenses are high so it may not be ideal without additional financial support or scholarship and to work one may need to get a working permit in case one is not from an EU or EEA state. In addition, the majority of courses are taught in the national language and only some are taught in English.

<sup>7</sup> "Study in Europe for Free (or Low Tuition Fees)." Study.EU, Retrieved from [www.study.eu/article/study-in-europe-for-free-or-low-tuition-fees](http://www.study.eu/article/study-in-europe-for-free-or-low-tuition-fees).

In most cases there are no tuition fees only at public universities, but there are some administrative expenses which can even reach up to €400 like in Iceland. In states like Finland or the Czech Republic non-EU/EEA students can still study for free if they study in the national language.

<sup>8</sup> Mauro was part of Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program which is funded through the U.S. Department of State and sponsored by the Bureau of Educational & Cultural Affairs (ECA)

<sup>9</sup> Mozambique is at the prominent 153th place out of 180 at Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2017

## Higher education in the United States

You might argue that comparing the world's 7<sup>th</sup> poorest country<sup>10</sup> with the EU is not fair so let's see another example. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the United States is the most popular destination for international students<sup>11</sup>. According to many rankings it is home to some of the best universities in the world. In the US system everyone must pay for higher education, although it is rare for US students to pay the full tuition amount. More than 80% of students receive some kind of financial aid<sup>12</sup>, but that does not mean it covers all expenses. Annual tuition fees for state schools, not including any other expenses, are an average of 9,970 USD for state residents and 25,620 USD for everyone else.

Average fees at US universities, 2017-18				
	Public two-year colleges	Public four-year colleges (in-state fees)	Public four-year colleges (out-of-state fees)	Private non-profit four-year colleges
<b>Tuition and other fees</b>	\$3,570	\$9,970	\$25,620	\$34,740
<b>Room and board</b>	\$8,400	\$10,800	\$10,800	\$12,210
<b>Total (per year)</b>	<b>\$11,970</b>	<b>\$20,770</b>	<b>\$35,420</b>	<b>\$46,950</b>

Figure 2 Average fees at US universities<sup>13</sup>

Study abroad programs are in most cases available through universities which is already limited by the fact that you have to pay to attend one. As a result, US students from upper

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<sup>10</sup> Tasch, Barbara. "RANKED: The 30 Poorest Countries in the World." Business Insider, Business Insider, 7 Mar. 2017, [uk.businessinsider.com/the-25-poorest-countries-in-the-world-2017-3/#30-senegal-gdp-per-capita-2578-2102-1](http://uk.businessinsider.com/the-25-poorest-countries-in-the-world-2017-3/#30-senegal-gdp-per-capita-2578-2102-1).

<sup>11</sup> Unesco UIS. (2017). Total inbound internationally mobile students. Retrieved from <http://uis.unesco.org/indicator/edu-mobility-in-total>

<sup>12</sup> Bridgestock, L. (2018). How Much Does it Cost to Study in the US? Retrieved from <https://www.topuniversities.com/student-info/student-finance/how-much-does-it-cost-study-us>

<sup>13</sup> Bridgestock, L. (2018).

middle-class families are the most likely to study abroad while students whose family income is under 50,000 USD per year are not likely to do so<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Horn, R. N., Jerome, R. T., & White, M. M. (2008). A CASE STUDY OF THE STUDY ABROAD DECISION: ACADEMIC AND INCOME PERSPECTIVES. *Virginia Social Science Journal*, 43

Many international students receive financial aid as well, but for 60.3% of students personal and family savings are the primary sources of funding<sup>15</sup>. Regardless of country of origin, paying 25,620 USD for a year of study is not something that most families can afford. Compared to a regular public school in the Czech Republic, the difference is striking. At my university for 66.3% of students, scholarships are the primary source of funding while studying abroad<sup>16</sup>. It is also interesting if we take a look at what percent of university students participated in a study abroad program. In the USA on average only 1.63% of students participate, while from the richest part of the USA, District of Columbia, 5.9%<sup>17</sup> which is still much lower than the Czech average of 9.9%<sup>18</sup>. Of course, financial background is just one of the many factors related to these statistics.

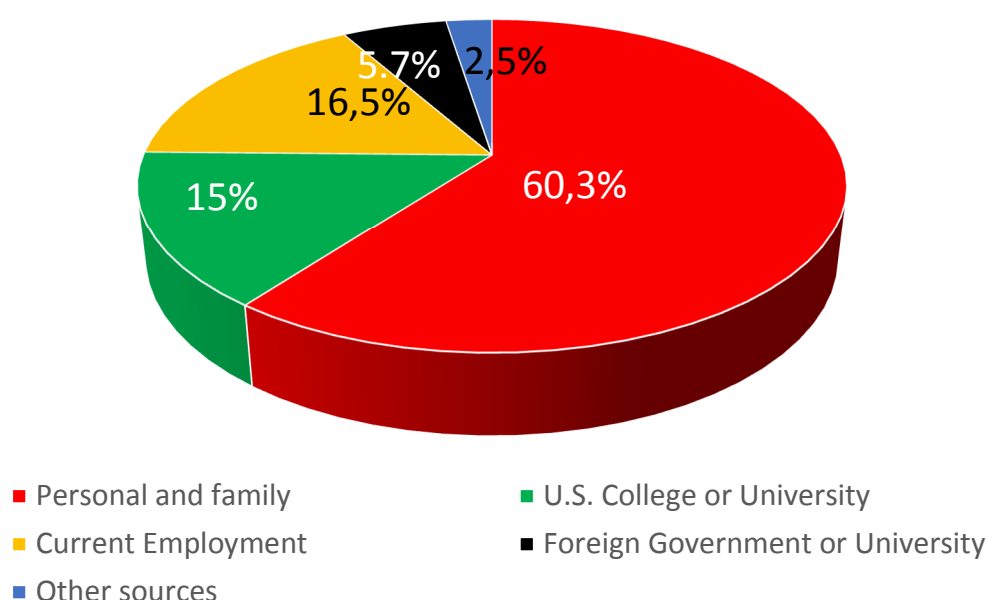


Figure 3 Primary source of funding for international students in the USA<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Institute of International Education. (2017). Primary Source of Funding, 2016/2017. *Open doors Report on International Educational Exchange*. Retrieved from <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Primary-Source-of-Funding>

<sup>16</sup> Internal report about study abroad participation at the University of Economics, Prague 2017

<sup>17</sup> Trends in U.S. Study Abroad. (2017). Retrieved from [http://www.nafsa.org/Policy\\_and\\_Advocacy/Policy\\_Resources/Policy\\_Trends\\_and\\_Data/Trends\\_in\\_U\\_S\\_Study\\_Abroad/](http://www.nafsa.org/Policy_and_Advocacy/Policy_Resources/Policy_Trends_and_Data/Trends_in_U_S_Study_Abroad/)

<sup>18</sup> Internal report about study abroad participation at the University of Economics, Prague 2017

<sup>19</sup> Institute of International Education. (2017)



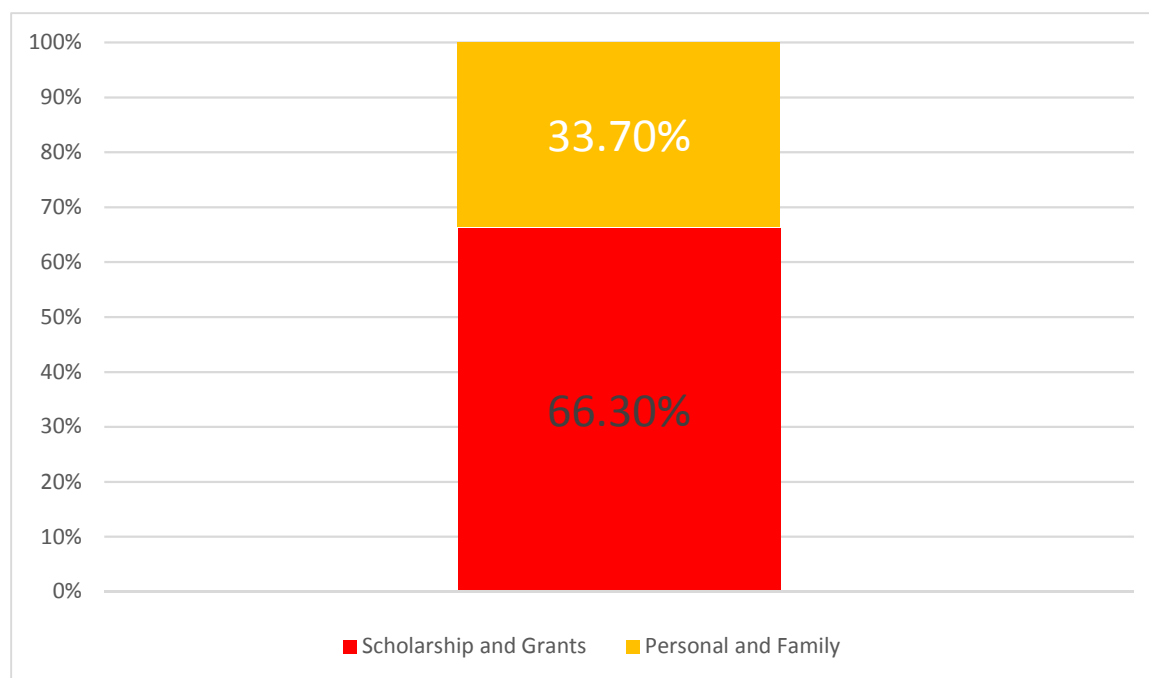


Figure 4 Primary source of funding for students at the University of Economics, Prague <sup>20</sup>

Overall, the country of origin and the socioeconomic status can seriously reduce or improve students' chances to study abroad.

### Learning mobility at secondary school level

English-speaking counties such as the UK, New Zealand or Australia are the most popular destinations but in the case of secondary school overseas study, the United States is the most popular.<sup>21</sup> At secondary school level there are some scholarships, but personal financial sources dominate over them. For that reason, studying abroad at secondary school level can be harder than at higher levels. Gathering data on how many students funded their study from their own resources or how many received financial aid is difficult. No reliable information was found so we need to take another approach.

In the United States there are two kinds of visas available for students wanting to attend secondary education: the purpose of F-1 visas is academic, meaning that after high school students will try to go to a university. Students must pay all the costs of their education at .S

<sup>20</sup> Internal report about study abroad participation at the University of Economics, Prague 2017

<sup>21</sup> Unesco UIS. (2017). Total inbound internationally mobile students. Retrieved from <http://uis.unesco.org/indicator/edu-mobility-in-total>

public schools and they will be limited to 12 months of study.<sup>22</sup> The length of study is not limited at private schools. Of course, the fee can be paid by someone other than the student. The purpose of J-1 visas is rather cultural exchange, in most cases they are funded from private sources. And it is primarily meant for exchange students.<sup>23</sup>

Some 94% of students receiving an F-1 visa<sup>24</sup> in the USA attend a private school which in average costs around 14,000 USD<sup>25</sup> plus in many cases extra fees for various exchange program agencies. This program is extremely popular among Chinese students who make up 58% of this group. In the case of China, 85% of people with a net worth of more than 950,000 USD plan to send their children to study abroad and more than half of them state that such study should begin at high school level.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Student Visa, U.S. Department of State, Retrieved from <http://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/study/student-visa.html>.

<sup>23</sup> J-1 Visa Basics, U.S. Department of State, <http://j1visa.state.gov/basics/>.

<sup>24</sup> Farrugia, C. (2017). Globally Mobile Youth: Trends in International Secondary Students in the United States, 2013-2016. Retrieved from <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Publications/Globally-Mobile-Youth-2013-2016>

<sup>25</sup> Private School Review (2017). Average Private School Tuition Cost (2017-2018). Retrieved from <https://www.privateschoolreview.com/tuition-stats/private-school-cost-by-state>

<sup>26</sup> Zeveloff, J. (2012). 90% Of China's Super Rich Want Their Children To Study Abroad. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/90-of-chinas-super-rich-want-their-children-to-study-abroad-2012-4>

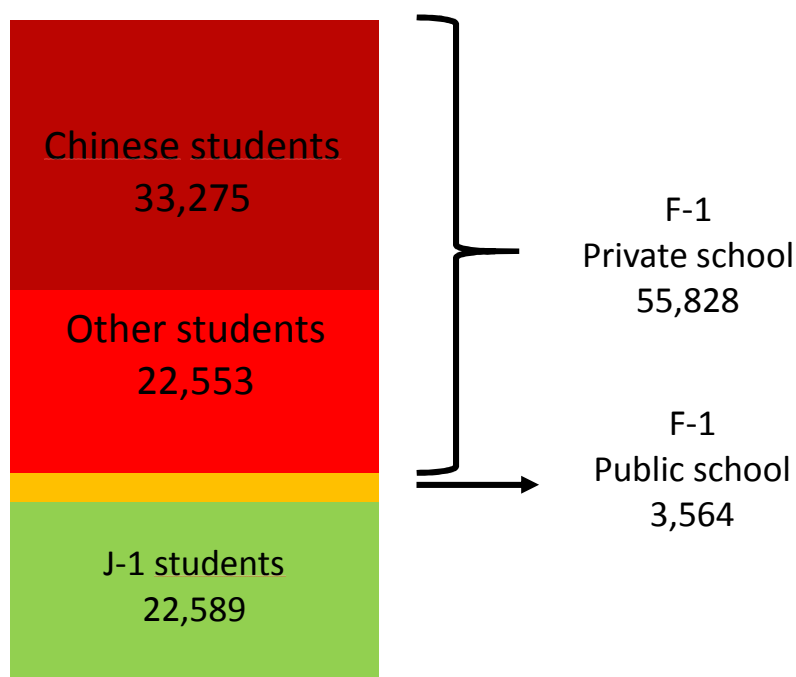


Figure 5 Composition of international students at secondary education in the USA<sup>27</sup>

Public schools were more popular among students with J-1 visas. Nevertheless, to obtain one, students may have to pay agency fees which can run from anywhere between 5,000 and 30,000 USD or even higher depending on agency, program and destination. As mentioned before exact data on how many students receive a scholarship was not available, but according to coordinators at a leading program, there are many more paying students than grant recipients.

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<sup>27</sup> Farrugia, C. (2017)

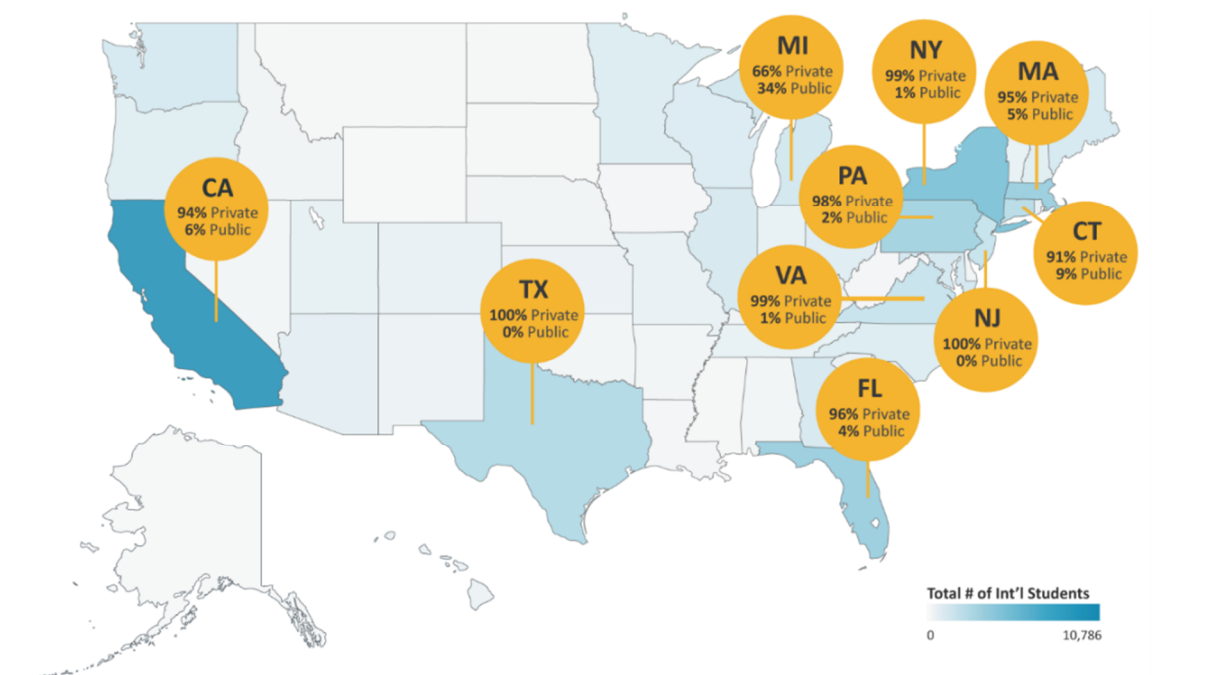


Figure 6 Enrollment distribution of international secondary students in leading host states, by school sector, Fall 2016<sup>28</sup>

As we can see from Figure 4 private schools are a far more popular choice among international students. Participants of exchange programs funded by the US government or other states and organizations, are in most cases attending public high schools. This implies that most likely students attending a private high school are paying the tuition fees from personal sources. Basically, in most cases you either have the money to study abroad or not. This is supported by a study from Prof. Gerhards, which found that an increase in income by 1000 euros increases the odds of attending a foreign school by more than 40 percent.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

Citizenship and socioeconomic background can significantly influence students' chances to study abroad, but this paper does not consider other factors such as parents' education, the skills of a student or information about opportunities. At the end of the day, we need to

<sup>28</sup> Farrugia, C. (2017)

<sup>29</sup> Gerhards, J. & Hans, S. (2016). Transnational Human Capital, Education, and Social Inequality. *Analyses of International Student Exchange. Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 42(2), pp. 99-117. Retrieved 29 Jan. 2018, from doi:10.1515/zfsoz-2013-0203

understand that the decision to study abroad is highly complex. In order to get a clearer picture, further studies need to be made to find out how significant are the factors that an individual can control (urge to study abroad, language skills, academic achievements, etc.), and the factors that an individual cannot or hardly can (socioeconomic background, citizenship, parents' education, etc.) in the final decision to study abroad.

After discussing the topic with friends, it is evident that there are still many students who would like to go but cannot afford to. To be fair, we have to mention that both at secondary and higher education levels the number of fully-funded scholarships is rising but it is never enough to meet the demand for deserving students who need them.

### **Discussion & Recommendations**

Now the question emerges: How to make study abroad programs more accessible for all, not just the privileged?

To suggest anything for higher education is a challenge. The system is based on government policy which is aimed to achieve a goal. For example, tuition fees might seem extremely high in the United States but in 2014 these generated 27 billion USD<sup>30</sup> which made it one of the biggest service-exports of the country. However, as I was speaking to my friends about studying abroad I realized that they have many misconceptions and limited information about the topic. Some of them were not even aware that they would qualify for a given program. Others just heard that it is expensive and difficult to transfer credits to their home institutions, and as a result opted not to go. If you are planning to study abroad, I strongly suggest doing some research about your options because it may be easier to find something than you think. Also, more effective communication towards students from schools could greatly improve the situation. Destroying the myths of study abroad programs can encourage more students to compete for available spots. I am not an expert by any means, but I do have a real-life experience as a former exchange student, so I will try to give my suggestion. I think, high school programs are very important because overseas experience can really shape the thinking of a young adult. When students see a different mentality, they realize that things can be done

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<sup>30</sup> Global Affairs Canada. (2016). Retrieved from <http://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/impact-2016/sec-2.aspx?lang=eng>

in ways they could not imagine before. When they return home, they can take this insight with them and use it for the betterment of their society.

One thing that amazed me in the USA was the support of the school and students by the community. At home when my school needed a projector or some similar equipment it took a while to obtain them because the school needed to ask for the money from the city council, government or else write a tender. In the United States when the football team needed jerseys the parents bought them, and the school helped those who were struggling to afford them. When part of the school building was damaged they organized a charity basketball game with the rival school in the town to cover some of the expenses. Why couldn't we ask the community to raise some money for a student from abroad who would stay for 10 months and who would enrich the life of the school and the community? If you look around in the United States, you can see libraries, buildings, classrooms everywhere named after generous patrons. Six years ago, when my local coordinator in the United States hosted the first ever exchange student in a small midwestern town of around 2,000 people she was not even a local coordinator. That student made such a great impression on her and the community, that the next year she became a coordinator and many others volunteered to host a student. Since then, she has placed 55 students from 22 different countries all made possible by families who volunteered to host students such as me. One student made all the difference and created a movement that has impacted half of the world. Sometimes a little spark can ignite a big fire.

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