

TO STAY OR NOT TO STAY: THAT IS A QUESTION

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Abstract

Emigration and immigration, particularly of young individuals, raise social, economic, and cultural problems for both the recipient and donor countries. Substantial fluctuations in these rates make coherent adjustment and planning for the resulting social processes at best difficult, at worst ineffective. We have undertaken a study of the behavior and motivation of university students as they enter the university educational system and begin their studies with an aim to provide a measure of predictability in this phenomenon.

To identify important factors which influence a young person's choice between continuing studies in a native university and a foreign one we have carried out a longitudinal study of about fifty Lithuanian students at three time instances: At t_0 , the time they choose between emigration or staying in their home country for their university education; at t_1 , soon after they arrive and first encounter their chosen environment; at t_2 , some six months or so after their direct experience of their chosen environment. The investigation was carried out with respondents drawn from universities in Lithuania and Great Britain. The information was collected through in-depth interviews using ethnographic techniques, initiated with a questionnaire designed to identify some four hundred binary values but allowing additional exploration of naturally arising motivational factors.

Keywords: Lithuanian students, migration, state, environment, influences

Introduction

While Lithuania was under Soviet rule, emigration was not a significant process: to the West it was prohibited by government decree, to the East it was simply not attractive. Emigration from Lithuania to the West started with the re-establishment of independent Lithuania in 1990. Initially it was viewed as a benign process, driven by pent up curiosity and the realization of economic benefits, and was expected to abate. During the last decade however, the attitude towards emigration has changed, as the cultural, demographic, economic, and social consequences have begun to be appreciated.

Thus one finds in the Lithuanian Demographic Yearbook the statement "In 2005–2013, 401.8 thousand residents emigrated from Lithuania." (Demographic yearbook 2013, p 114/ <http://osp.stat.gov.lt/services-portlet/pub-edition-file?id=2992>). This number may not seem very significant on the scale of a country such as the USA, but on the scale of Lithuania this represents about fifteen percent of the total population. This number is sufficiently large to guarantee serious social, economic, and cultural consequences in itself; for example it is comparable to the current unemployment rate. Because a significant part of the outflow consists of academic youth one can expect only a magnification of the consequences, even if some students return home after their studies. Indeed perhaps the simplest indicator of problems is provided by the recent (and traumatic) efforts to reorganize the national educational establishment to cope with a decrease in the number of enrolled students.

Insights from the research on the Lithuanian emigration

The recognition that emigration could raise serious problems was accompanied by efforts on the part of sociologists, anthropologists, historians, as well as other researchers to characterize and understand the phenomenon. Most of the early empirical studies involved small samples (rarely exceeding one hundred), encountered opportunistically, and concentrated on social and socio-economic reasons for emigration. Among the reports with a larger number of respondents is that of Simanskiene and Pauzoliene (2012,148), who used questionnaires to assess the state of 412 persons, concluding that most emigrants left the country for economic reasons, but did note that individuals with high professional qualifications also emigrated while seeking an environment allowing more self-expression or to take advantage of career possibilities. A number of studies evaluated the consequences of emigration on the national scale, with, for example, Berzinskiene, Butkus, and Matuzeviciute (2014,333) stating: "Over the past decade significantly increased flows of emigration from Lithuania pointed out the relevance of immigration impact assessment on national economic growth, as the country is losing economic, scientific, technical, innovative potential." Damudiene (2013, 107 - 110) commented that migrating individuals often cannot explain the motives for their decisions but did characterize economic, socio-cultural, political, psychological, geographical, and demographic factors in terms of "pull" and "push" variables. Rudzinskiene and Paulaiskaite (2014,76), using a sample of 140 respondents, also concluded that while most emigrants left the country for economic reasons, but also noted that there was a significant economic benefit from emigrants in the form of remittances. As Lithuanian government services became more functional (and the scope of its activities expanded) and integrated with European Union support, government data became the basis for many of the studies; on the whole the assertions mentioned earlier were confirmed (though perhaps with better statistical indices). Improved technical services allow selecting populations for study, such as reported by Aidis, Krupickaite, and Blinstrubaitė ("The loss of intellectual potential: migration tendencies among university students in Lithuania", 2005). Other researchers reported student attitudes about emigration (Merkys et al., 2006), explored student motives for seeking employment outside of Lithuania (Skackauskaite, 2007), considered "brain drain" and the reverse processes (Didzgalvyte, Pukeliene, 2010), as well as aspects of internal migrations (Kvedaraite et al., 2011; Repeckiene et al, 2009; Matulionis et al., 2010).

A first order summary of the available information on emigration in Lithuania might be as follows: On the population level emigration rates seem to be governed by a ratio of the apparent benefits (mostly concrete economic ones, but also as anticipated wider opportunities) to the perceived difficulty in making the transition (mostly from uncertainties about what will be encountered). Student behavior seems to accord to that of the population as a whole, perhaps modified by a larger optimism factor. The available information does not give insight into the mechanisms that lead to the described state of affairs. Knowledge of such mechanisms will be needed if an effective policy to modify emigration rates is to be developed.

What is specific in students' emigration research?

In this paper we report on an attempt to integrate three features in a novel way to understand the mechanisms underlying the emigration process: a) We study students, b) We introduce variables which reflect student motivations, and c) We carry out a longitudinal study, with the same students being repeatedly followed over a significant time period. These choices were the result of a number of considerations which we now briefly discuss. They range from purely personal preferences to systemic considerations.

We chose to study the emigration of students partially because by being a well characterizable sample they are easier to study, but primarily because their migration impacts

strongly, over a long time period, all processes and systems in the life of a nation. Changes in the behavior of students cause changes not only in the nation's internal processes but also in the relations developed with the rest of the World. Thus, as some of the studies mentioned earlier have recognized, it is practically important to understand the behavior of this group.

The same attributes of students that make it easier to study them also raise the possibility that there might be variables more important with students than with the general population. Being a student makes immersion in an educational process inevitable, so that information, judgment, and communication patterns are likely to be more varied than in the general population. Thus study of this group needs to be more open-ended and to rely on feedback interactions, thus leading to an interview approach.

Developing a framework that makes prediction possible

Finally we note that we use a dynamical systems approach in this investigation because we are interested in developing a framework that makes prediction possible (see Vaisnys, Buivydas, Ramanauskaitė, 2010; Ramanauskaitė, Vaisnys, 2009). Key to the use of this methodology are a) the simultaneous characterization of both the system we are interested and of its environment, and b) a search for relationships between past state variable values and current state values. If such relations are to be found the observations must be longitudinal, describing behavior over a significant span of time. Empirical evidence about the absence of such a relationship would also be of scientific interest.

In a certain sense a longitudinal study is never ending and always just beginning, so that any report is preliminary. In our investigation we have observations at two time instances (with partial data available for a third time instance). While this is formally sufficient to characterize a system, we know from prior experience that more extensive time sequences are needed. In this report we concentrate on some qualitative conclusions based on the observations, present examples of system and environmental variables which are not usually observed in more standard statistical investigations, and also demonstrate that the variables of interest are indeed time varying, something that is necessary to this approach.

The population for the study was constructed by choosing five sub-populations of ten students or potential students each: group 1 – pupils graduating from intermediate school and leaving for a foreign university, group 2 – students graduating with BA from Lithuanian university and leaving for a master's program at a foreign university, group 3 – pupils graduating from intermediate school and entering a Lithuanian university, group 4 – students graduating with BA from Lithuanian university and entering a master's program at a Lithuanian university, group 5 – students returning after studies at a foreign university to enter a Lithuanian university. The respondents were drawn from Lithuanian students in Lithuania or Great Britain, the student group assignment being made at the time of the first interview occurring at t_0 . In the Lithuanian educational system the time t_0 was during the summer. Each respondent was interviewed again at a time, denoted by t_1 , soon after encountering his/her designated environment, typically in the Fall after the student had been in the new environment for about a month or two. A third interview was held, arranged after the person had been immersed in the designated environment for about a year. Further interviews will be held as the students approach the end of their programs. The information was collected by in-depth interviews using ethnographic techniques, initiated with questionnaires designed to identify some four hundred binary values but allowing additional exploration of naturally arising motivational factors.

To indicate the sort of data that is obtained we present Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 1

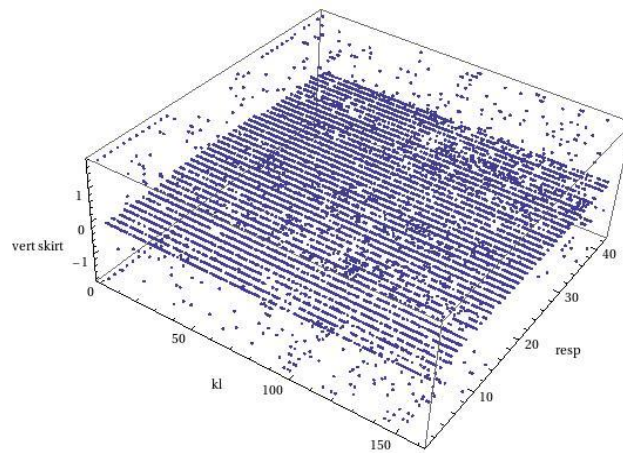
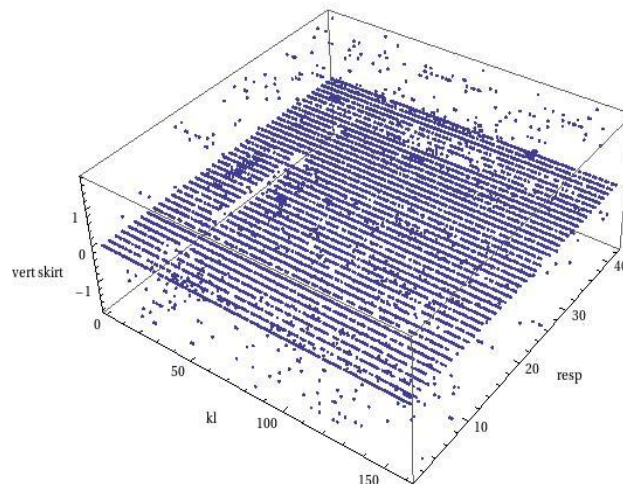


Figure 2



In both figures the horizontal axes reference a subset of the questionnaire entries, labeled by "kl" (160 out of 400 possible), and the respondents, labeled by "resp", respectively. In Fig.1 the vertical axis is the difference in subject responses between those given at t1 and those given at t0, while in Fig.2 we show the difference in subject responses between those given at t2 and those given at t1. The figures clearly show that there are significant changes in the values assigned by respondents with the passage of time, and a closer examination of the responses indicates that there are systematic differences in the behavior of the sample groups group1 – group 5.

Changes of state when facing the new environment

We now turn to a more detailed examination of those aspects in the data that are probably more characteristic of student migrants than the general population. We couch the presentation in terms of assertions that involve a combination of both the binary responses and of the individuals in the sample group and scale the overall response between 0 and 100. We use the signs <, =, > to highlight the direction of changes, if any, with time (t0, t1, t2).

Q1: Are you sufficiently informed about the program you are in?

t0 t1 t2
 gr1 33 < 42 < 58
 gr2 14 < 57 < 71
 gr3 29 = 29 < 73
 gr4 56 < 78 < 89
 gr5 29 < 57 = 57

Only a small number of students felt that they knew what they were getting into when choosing their studies (t0). It is striking that gr3 (students in Lithuanian universities) continued to feel lost well after (or perhaps not) engaging in their program of study (t1). A more detailed examination of the interview material reveals that many of the students feel they are not in a program they really wanted and that to many it was surprising to think that they could have gathered relevant information before making their decisions.

Q2: Are you fellow students motivated?

t0 t1 t2
 gr1 58 = 58 < 67
 gr2 29 < 86 > 57
 gr3 57 = 57 > 43
 gr4 33 < 44 = 44
 gr5 71 > 57 = 57

We can note that largest changes occur with students making a change in their environment – gr 2 Lithuanian students encountering foreign MS students, gr5 Lithuanian students returning after study in a foreign university.

Q3: Do you think you must study many unnecessary subjects in your program?

t0 t1 t2
 gr1 50 > 33 > 8
 gr2 43 = 43 > 29
 gr3 43 = 43 > 29
 gr4 78 > 44 > 22
 gr5 14 < 43 > 29

Recall gr4 corresponds to students studying in Lithuanian universities, and while initially they feel being subject to irrelevancies, their attitude changes to that typical of most students within about a month. Students returning from foreign educational programs (gr5) felt that their earlier programs had been more relevant.

Q4: I am choosing my studies in accord with my preferred residence location?

t0 t1 t2
 gr1 0 = 0 = 8
 gr2 14 = 14 < 29
 gr3 71 < 86 > 43
 gr4 100 = 100 > 78
 gr5 86 = 86 > 71

Note that students choosing studies at a foreign university (gr1 and gr2) do not appear to make their selection on the basis of a desire to live in that country and that such a proclivity does not develop after a year of residence. With persons who study in Lithuania there is a strong relation between choice of study location and residence location, decreasing over a year time span. The in-depth interviews reveal that this change can be attributed to dissatisfaction with their educational programs.

In conclusion

While it is too early to attempt construction of a data based quantitative model for the behavior of students in choosing between domestic and foreign study several qualitative generalizations can be presented. The first generalization is not about the system chosen for study (a student population) but about the environment of that system (as characterized in a systems approach): the Lithuanian higher educational establishment will need to improve not only on the content and delivery of its programs, but also in informing society (and especially future students) about its goals and expectations. Not unrelated to the above comment are several generalizations about the students themselves from the in-depth interviews. For example, researchers were struck by how poorly informed potential students were about the alternatives for further education that they were considering, be they foreign or domestic. Not only did they not have accurate information about the programs themselves but they did not have a realistic awareness of the environment in which they would have to live. In trying to clarify how such a situation might arise in the information age we found that most students relied on their peers for information, essentially ignoring such sources as parents, teachers, or even general news sources. This gave rise to a virtual reality which was self-sustaining, relatively closed to outside influences, maintaining the assumption that foreign educational institutions are much better than domestic ones. Thus many students were disillusioned by their experiences. What is particularly fascinating is that even the best students seemed to accept the assumptions of this virtual community. Their good fortune was that such students were admitted to high quality programs, and would indeed get a good education receiving it under favorable financial circumstances, and did not have to be disillusioned. In the end all students probably suffer from, as George Bernard Shaw has remarked, "the single biggest problem in communication (is) - the illusion that it has taken place".

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