
HEALTH RISKS DURING STUDENT LABOUR MOBILITY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND USA

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Abstract: International student work programs are major social and economic phenomenon in the modern stage of development of Bulgaria. They are known with different names - student brigades, Work-and-travel programs and others. According to the author's definition, these programs represent "a process in which the participants - students in bachelor's or master's program, voluntarily change their place of residence for a certain period of time (usually between 3 and 6 months), going outside their own country, to participate in economic activities, with or without the involvement an intermediary, as it does not change their status of students". They are typical for a limited number of countries, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe (former socialist countries) and exclude the economically developed countries, as well as the Third World countries (with some exceptions, such as: The Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and others). These are countries with well-functioning educational structure, preparing a sufficient number of students with good language training, yet with lower economic development and lower incomes compared to the host countries. The work in this type of employment programs is mainly seasonal, mostly in the summer and lasts an average of about four months. Most attractive for the participants are both the high incomes and the opportunities to travel and explore new places and cultures. A colossal number of Bulgarian youths studying in Bachelor and Master programs are involved in student labor mobilities so far. For the period 2000 - 2016, in the US alone were involved about 100 000 Bulgarian students. The most preferred destinations for participation in student labor mobilities are: the United States, overtaking all other countries with a strong lead, followed by the UK, and in rare cases - Germany, Denmark, and others. This article presents the results from the first ever study on the impact of student international labour mobilities on the health of students. The survey was conducted in 2016. It involves 125 people who participated in student work programs in the US and UK in the last three years. The results should not be seen as a means to encourage or discourage students from participating. They provide an objective assessment of what is happening in quest to be socially useful. The study aims to help students wishing to participate for the first time in international labour mobilities, as well as their parents and families - to be able to make a better informed and meaningful choice about their future participation. The presented results can serve intermediary companies in planning and exercising control over the conditions, under which students work. They can also serve the employers in the US and UK - to maintain good working conditions, which they offer to the students.

Keywords: student programs, mobility, employment, health.

1. INTRODUCTION

The **International Student Work Programs** have been a major social and economic phenomenon in the modern stage of development of Bulgaria. According to the definition, proposed by Karadzhev, these represent: *„The process, whereby participating students in bachelor's or master's programs voluntarily change their place of residence for a certain period of time (usually between 3 and 6 months), going outside their own country, to participate in economic activities, with or without the assistance of an intermediary, as it does not change their status of students”*⁶⁷ (2016). These student programs are typical for countries with well-functioning educational structure, preparing a sufficient number of students with good language training, yet with lower economic development and lower incomes compared to the host countries. These are predominantly the Central and Eastern European (former socialist) countries and are not observed in the economically developed countries, as well as the Third World countries (with some exceptions, such as: The Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and others). Students' employment programs provoke mass labor mobilities abroad among the youth population of these countries. The processes **involve tens of thousands of young people every year** and in spite of their massiveness at the time are still barely studied. The most extensive research on student labor mobilities abroad currently are made by Dr. Vladimir Karadzhev and cover a 5-year cycle of studies among more than 600 students and their families.

⁶⁷ Karadzhev, V., M. Shishmanova, E. Karashtranova, *Students' brigades - benefits, opportunities and disadvantage*, "PhD Student Scientific Session of the FMNS - 2016", SWU "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, (2016).

Students' international labor programs create opportunities for students for working abroad with seasonal duration. They do not interfere with the learning process of students and are scheduled properly for this purpose, mainly during the summer holidays. Thus established, the employment programs (also called Work-and-travel programs) for a short period of time became the preferred option by students for work during the summer holidays. The high profitability for the students of their participation in international labor programs, compared to the conditions of seasonal work in their home country has been unequivocally established⁶⁸ (Karadzhev, 2013). Their main attraction, is a result of the simultaneous action of two powerful factors stimulating the participation of students - high wages, a level impossible to achieve in seasonal work in native conditions on the one hand, and on the other hand opportunities to explore new places and cultures, to experience different adventures and trips during and after the work program abroad⁶⁹ (Karadzhev, 2016). They even have their own name in the colloquial language, which is widely used. They are called "students brigades". According to the US Embassy in Sofia, Bulgaria - for the period between 2000 and 2016, round 100 000 Bulgarian students have participated in the United States only⁷⁰ (Karadzhev, 2015).

2. STAGES, RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present survey was held among 125 students. All of them have participated in at least one international labor program during the last three years. These students are from the western part of Bulgaria, living in the area between the town of Vidin in the north and the town of Petrich in the south. All of the participants are studying in the South-West University "Neofit Rilski" at the time of the survey, i.e. October - November, 2016.

The main aim of the survey is to obtain information about the health risks that can occur during or after finishing a student seasonal work program abroad.

Methods of research include: gathering raw information on the topic, processing, visualizing and analyzing the results and forming conclusions and recommendations. The information was collected through a specific sample size survey developed specifically for this purpose by Dr. Karadzhev. The survey was held among a representative group of students and was standardized for all the participants. The poll was developed for online completion using Google Forms. The information was collected and processed electronically. Each participant received exact instructions regarding the correct and comprehensive completion of the form. The survey passed several stages:

Stage 1: Revealing the gender structure of the participants.

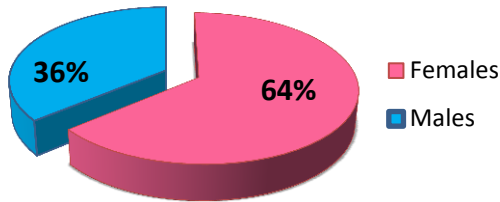
As shown on Figure 1, the ratio between female and male participants is app. 2:1, with females prevailing. At a later stage it may lead to some minor distortions in the general picture. Since girls are not really "designed" for hard work they might report more problems when working conditions are relatively heavy. They are also more compassionate and admit problems more easily than the boys who are generally brought up to act firmly and masculine. These issues are, however, beyond our control.

⁶⁸ Karadzhev, V., *Employment and Income Satisfaction of Abroad Working Students*, The Fifth International Conference of FMNS, Blagoevgrad, BULGARIA, Volume 7, p.p. 37 – 46, ISSN: 1314-0272 , (2013).

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⁷⁰ Karadzhev, V., *Students summer work programs as a way to permanent emigration in the USA*, The Sixth International Conference of FMNS, SWU "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, ISSN: 1314-0272, (2015).

Gender structure of participants



Country of participation in an International Student Work Program

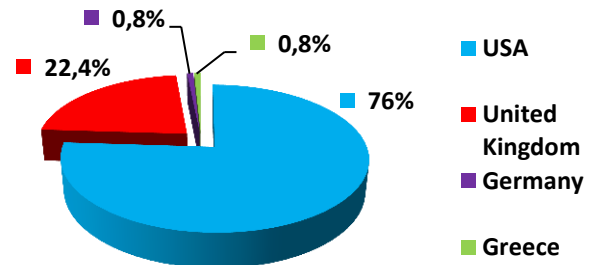


Figure 1. Gender structure of participants' group in the present survey. Figure 2. Countries of participation in student labor programs for the group in the present survey.

Stage 2: Determining the country of participation

This is a question of a big practical interest when researching student labor mobilities. Choosing the country to participate in reveals many things about the process. In the first place – it reveals how rich you were before applying for the program. The program prices for the USA are quite higher than the rest of the countries. Additionally, in the greatest majority of cases it involves an intermediary organization. For example – an average cost for applying a work-and-travel USA program costs circa 2 000 US dollars. This exactly equals the official sum of maintenance of a person for a whole year 2015 (and 2016) according to the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria⁷¹. In comparison – the costs for participating in a seasonal labor program in the UK are about 400-500 US Dollars, mostly without the help of an intermediary subject (Karadzhov, 2016). In the second place – it reveals the determination of a student to participate in a long-distanced job opportunity. The majority of the students have chosen this particular option. As seen on Figure 2 – more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the total number of participants entered the work-and-travel programs in the US. Additionally this choice leads to harder work on a later stage because the more money is invested in participation; the more should be earned by hard work many hours a day. This results usually in starting a second job or sometimes even a third one. The additional job positions are part-time, because they must fit the schedule of the first job contracted with the intermediary as this is the legal reason for receiving a J1 visa. Other countries, such as Germany, Greece, Denmark, Norway and others – are largely an exception of the rule. They have been chosen primarily due to the shorter distances, presence of a family member or relatives, phobia from airplane flights etc.

Stage 3: Working experience

At this point two features of participation were revealed – the average duration of a working program, and the number of programs in which the participants have entered so far. Combined, these two features reveal the general experience of the students in the survey. This is quite important because as seen on a later stage – the experience has a lot in common with the health concerns of the students due to fatigue, stress and load, which are accumulated in the participants over time. Figure 3 shows how the typical students on a WAT-program look like at their working place. These young people look cheerful and energized but at the same time they often have to work more than 10-12 hours a day. This is only possible because of their young age and due to their generally good health. The widely known picture is deceptive. Behind the obvious there is a lot of stress, overload, nostalgia, and sometimes – psychological depression.

⁷¹ National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, *Statistical data › Demographic and social statistics › Households Income, Expenditure and Consumption › Household income › Total income*, (2016).



Figure 3. Students on a work-and-travel program in the US. Photo credit: Author

On Figures 4 and 5 is presented the experience of the current survey participants in international work programs. As seen on Figure 4 most of the students spend 4 months abroad when entering a seasonal work program. These are mostly the USA participants because their programs are typically contracted for this duration with the connected visa issues.

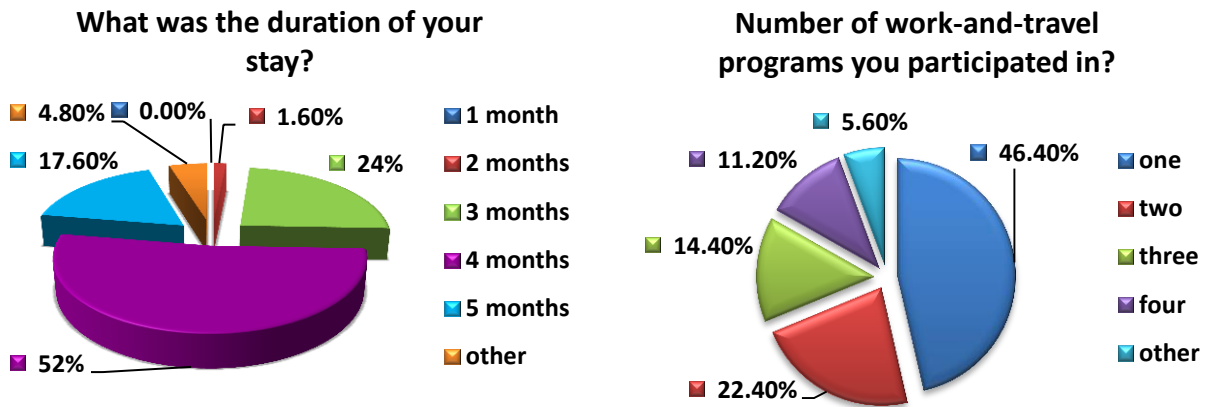


Figure 4. Average duration of a student labor program. Figure 5. Average number of work programs participated

Students almost always fit a trip through the USA in their schedule, as well as some shopping and free time at the end of the working program. This usually lasts one week to 10 days. The section “other” includes periods of 5 to 6 months. The UK participants are usually having a longer work stay than the US participants. This is due to the fact that they mainly go there without an intermediary and strict arriving and departure dates. They sign job contracts with the help of relatives or friends and they are not obliged to return on a certain date because there are no visas for the UK (for EU citizens). These participants, however, are also students, and a long duration of stay will affect their education. Usually the students who work a seasonal job in the UK stay there up to 5 months, rarely - 6. They are predominantly involved in agriculture – heavy and not so profitable work, compared to the US student programs. On Figure 5 are shown the number of participations in an international student work program. The present data confirmed the results of previous experiment findings according to the number of student participations in work programs abroad. The most important conclusion was that students lose their enthusiasm rapidly after their first work program participation. After the first year only half of them participate again. Then again, those who participate for the third time are half less than those who have 2 work trips. *The reasons are both - subjective and objective ones. Subjective reasons are - accumulated exhaustion, disappointment in the organization of work and*

wages, the foreign culture and language, the relative financial independence achieved after the previous trips, etc. Objective reasons are - preparation for graduation and state exam (Karadzov, 2013)⁷².

Stage 4: Profile of employment positions occupied by the participants

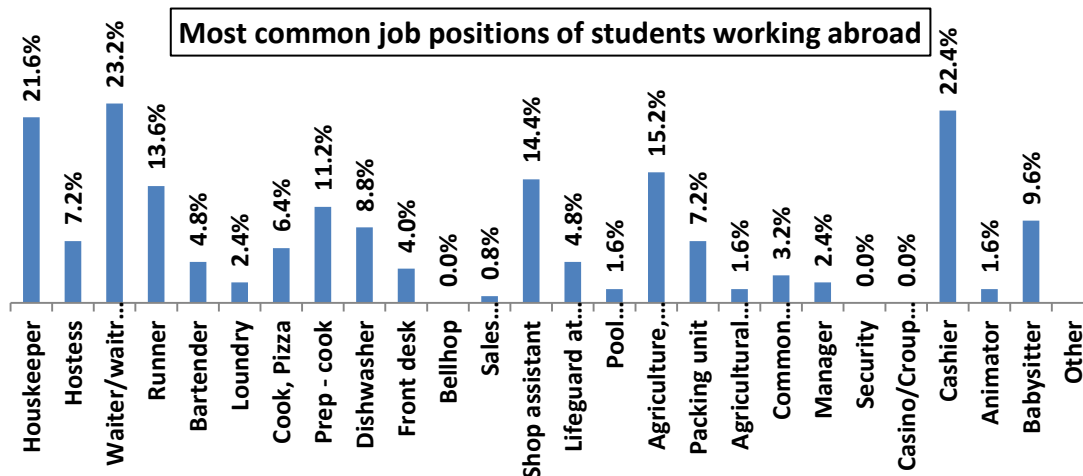
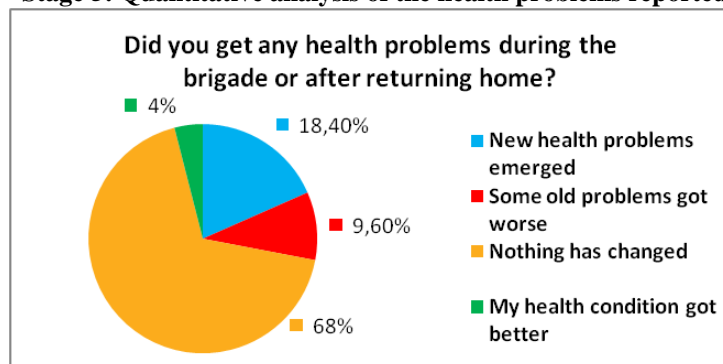


Figure 6. Typical employment positions of students working abroad. (Participants gave more than 1 answer)

As seen from Figure 6 the predominant economic activities include: sales, hotel and restaurant servicing, entertainment and agriculture. The jobs are seasonal, low-qualified, and spread over many economic branches. Often students have to work outdoors or to stand up for hours. The employment is connected to the health consequences reported by students. Most of the complaints came from those who worked in agriculture (100% in the UK), whereas many participants in the US experienced fewer problems due to the lighter labor conditions. Interestingly, most of the students who earned the highest wages didn't report much health issues, even working 12-18 hours a day, e.g. the waiters/waitresses. Enjoying high profits suppressed the negative impressions among participants mobilizing their mental and physical strengths, so that they barely report any discomforts during the work programs.

Stage 5: Quantitative analysis of the health problems reported by students after work-and-travel programs



It started with a quantitative analysis of health problems occurring during or after participation in a work program abroad. The most obvious result is that the majority of students didn't feel any health worsening. Yet, a quarter reported new health problems, and about one tenth declared worsening of old symptoms. These results should not be neglected. These programs included more than 120 000 students so far in Bulgaria only. If a quarter of them got any health problems, then this is a large scale problem for the country.

Figure 7. Participants who received health problems after a work-and-travel program

⁷² Karadzov, V., *How often and to which destinations are Bulgarian students travelling in international work journeys*, The 3rd International Geography Symposium, June 10 – 13, 2013 Kemer, / Antalya / Turkey, P.p. 641-644, ISBN: 978-605-62253-8, (2013).

Stage 5: Most common health problems reported by students after work-and-travel programs

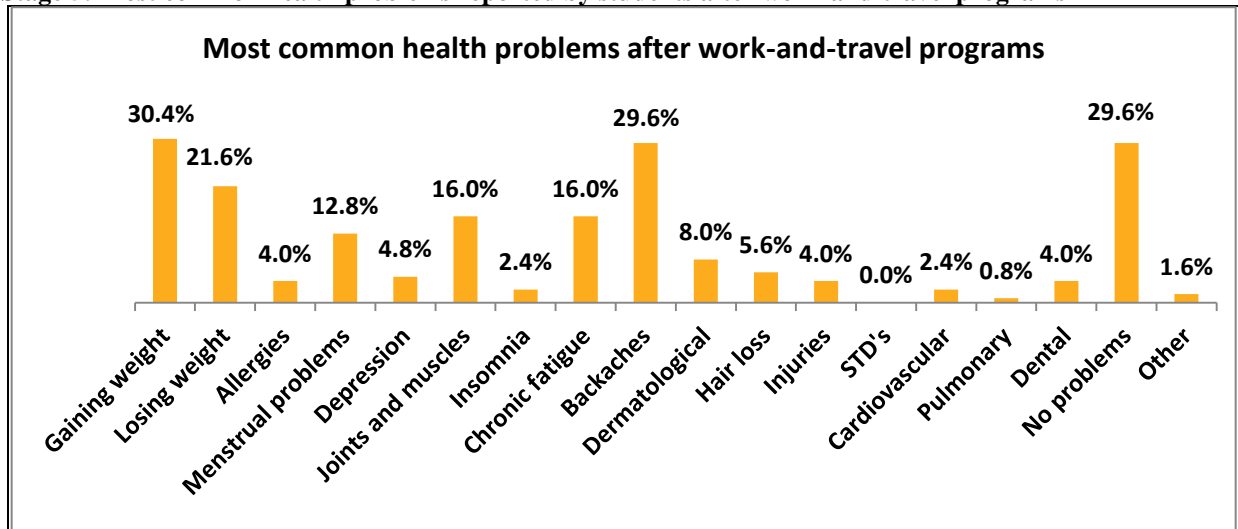


Figure 8. Most common health problems after work-and-travel programs. (Participants gave more than 1 answer)

As shown on Figure 8, the most common health problems reported by students after work-and-travel programs include: Gaining or losing weight, Allergies, Menstrual problems, Depression, Joints and muscles problems, Insomnia, Chronic fatigue, Backaches, Dermatological problems, Hair loss, Injuries, Cardiovascular problems, Pulmonary problems, Dental problems and others. Here are some of the major factors that lead to the emerging of these problems: The stress felt by the participants, caused by the hard and prolonged work; The exhaustion from the long working days, less resting and the long period of 3-4 or more consecutive months of hard work; The psychological discomfort, caused by the lack of friends and family as main supporters in life, their miss and the nostalgia for home. Curiously, some students report that they literally couldn't get ill during a WAT-program in the US. Even if they were soaking wet and stayed like this for hours outdoors, which would bring them a cold in their home country, such situation didn't harm them at all in the USA. They suspect, this is because of the antibiotics in the meat there. In conclusion it can be assumed that the health problems occurring during the student work programs abroad are not very heavy. They are typical for conditions of: great effort, intensive work, lack of sleep, exhaustion and stress while being away from home. The young age of the participants, however, diminishes the bad consequences. Students are strong and young; their health cannot be impaired so easily. The health issues they receive (if any appear at all) are not very hazardous, their symptoms in most of the cases are quickly overwhelmed after returning home when students have the chance for a good and prolonged rest.

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