

THE IMPROVEMENT IN THE QUALITY OF LEARNING IN EUROPE'S HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract:

A major aim of Bologna processes is to increase the mobility of students and teachers. The Diploma Supplement, the ECTS, Europass, Youthpass and the harmonization of the structure of higher education are several measures that can have a positive impact on students' mobility. Nowadays, more and more students decide to spend a part of their studies in another foreign university for some days, months or years. The current study aims at elaborating an in-depth analysis of the conditions for outgoing students from Romania within Erasmus activities under Life Long Learning Programme as well as the impact of these mobilities on personal and career development. The participation to mobility programs (among which Erasmus programme plays a major role) has been constantly growing in the last year instead of a series of difficulties: (administrative and financial constraints, information and communication constraints, obstacles in recognition of the studies period abroad).

Keywords: international students mobility, Erasmus programme, higher education collaboration.

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning in higher education is a continuous process. In Lisbon in the year 2000, the EU Member States agreed on the ambitious policy goal of turning the EU into the world's most dynamic knowledge-based economy over the next decade. They also called for European education and training to become a "world quality reference" by 2010. To achieve this, the EU's Education Ministers formulated the "Education & Training 2010" Work Programme in 2001, which set the policy framework for education and training in the EU for the coming decade.

The Bologna Process aims to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010, in which students can choose from a wide and transparent range of high quality courses and benefit from smooth recognition procedures. The Bologna Declaration of June 1999 has put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more

competitive and more attractive for Europeans and for students and scholars from other continents.

After Bologna (1999), we have Prague (2001), Berlin (2003) and Bergen (2005, London (17/18 May 2007) and in reconvene Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve (April 2009).

All across Europe, countries and universities are engaged in a process of modernisation. From an EU perspective, these reforms are part of the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs, which also encompasses reinforced cooperation in vocational education and training (Copenhagen Process). To establish synergies between Copenhagen and Bologna, the Commission has brought forward its proposal for the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF). This is linked to and supported by other initiatives in the fields of transparency of qualifications (EUROPASS), credit transfer (ECTS - ECVET) and quality assurance (ENQA - ENQAVET).

The European Credit Transfer System was introduced in 1998 and it has been constantly promoted through The Strategy of Romanian Higher Education for 2002-2010.

The documents regarding the development of education in Europe and mainly, the Work Programme "Education and Training – 2010" identified the key areas for investment in order to achieve the objectives set for 2010. These documents underline that *"it is the responsibility of Member States to identify the areas most in need of action according to their national situations, and in view of the common objectives"*.

As regards the higher education, the following main objectives have been established:

- implementation of the internal and external mechanisms for quality assessment, assurance and improvement;
- strengthening the university autonomy and raising social accountability at the same time;
- improving the performance of students and teachers;
- better correlation of higher education with the labour market;
- reorganisation of the learning – teaching process, based on the new academic pedagogy and didactics;
- encouraging the integration of Romanian higher education into the European one and the international cooperation;
- opening of universities to the economic and social environment.

The major aims of Bologna process it to increase the mobility of students, The Diploma Supplement, the ECTS, Europass and the harmonization of the structure of higher education are several measures that can have a positive impact on students' mobility.

Nowadays, more and more students decide to spend a part of their studies in another foreign university.

The current study aims at elaborating an in-depth analysis of the conditions for outgoing students from Romania within Erasmus activities as

well as the impact of these mobilities on personal and career development. The participation to mobility programs (among which Erasmus programme plays a major role) has been constantly growing in the last year instead of a series of difficulties: (administrative and financial constraints, information and communication constraints, insufficient visibility of the programme, obstacles in recognition of the studies period abroad).

2. Literature review

Mobility should allow students to fully participate in the life of the university and student community and it will also give them a chance to consider their study abroad as a recognizable element of their studies, not a gap year or extracurricular experience.

On the other hand, mobility does result in an important change at personal development (in term of working skills, international exposure is an asset for future employment).

The overall aim of the study was to give an overview of the socio-economic situation of students who participated in the Erasmus programme during the academic years 2004/2008.

From fairly modest beginnings – around 3000 students took part in the first year (1987) – the programme Erasmus has blossomed into a true social and cultural phenomenon, Erasmus students have become an integral part of virtually all the campus across Europe. In 2005 – 2006, there were over 178000 participants, involving at least 2500 universities from 45 different countries. For participants – 80% of who have never lived in a foreign country before – the programme can be a life-changing experience, *"When students and teachers go off to study or teach abroad under Erasmus, they are not just getting a high-quality academic experience, they are learning new ways of seeing things and new ways of being, they learn languages and cultures, they become more open-minded to „other ways” of doing things"* added Commissioner Figel.

According to research, a major benefit of the programme has been in improving individual's job prospects. In an increasingly interlinked world, employers are growing more aware of the Benefits of a study period abroad, Language skills are becoming more valued, as well as the other „soft skills” that participants pick up, such as improved communication and cultural sensitivity.

3. Methodology and findings

Data from ERASMUS students was gathered by means of an online survey. The hyperlink to the online survey was provided to all participant universities in the programme, who have distributed it in turn amongst the students participating in the programme in the years of reference. Overall, 824 valid answers from 58 universities were received. This large sample provides a representative sample for analysis with low margins of error.

The survey gathered data on the profile of respondents to the survey, their assessment of the ERASMUS period, their socio-economic background and their financial situation.

3.1. Quantitative design

The student population for the quantitative research consists of Romanian students who were part of the Erasmus exchanges during the 2004/2008 academic years, The Erasmus student population in Romania was: 2962 students in 2004/2005, 3261 students in 2005/2006 and 3350 students in 2006/2007, Quantitative data has been collected from 824 Romanian students, by means of an online, self-administered questionnaire comprising 28 questions, The data collection stage unfolded between the 1st of September, 2007 and end of December 2007.

Quantitative data has been collected from the yearly National Agency report. The data collection stage unfolded between 1st of January 2008 and end of February 2008.

3.2. Description of research instruments

The questionnaire is structured into four sections, following the phases and the logic of the mobility process:

- *Identification* data include questions about the respondents themselves and other relevant items for the study: the home university; the home faculty; gender; the academic year for the ERASMUS study period; the host country.

- *Motivation* includes data on the reasons for participating in the Erasmus exchanges and the importance of a scholarship for the participant's future career.

- *Information* includes data about Erasmus students' participation in other European Programmes, duration of Erasmus mobility, the selection process of participating students, sources of acquiring information on the programme.

- *Personal experience* – captures the mobility experience from the participating student's perspective by studying a variety of aspects such as social (integration in the host university), administrative (grant payment, accommodation), the impact of the mobility programme on future personal career and personal evolution (professional performance and competencies), the most positive/negative aspects of the mobility.

3.3. Results

The Erasmus students appreciate to the highest extent the quality of the teaching process in the host university (62.67%), The percentage of the Erasmus students aiming at continuing post university studies in the host university or another university abroad is almost identical (61.55%), 58.72% of the respondents consider their mobility opened opportunities for new mobilities.

There are also a high percentage of those who declare they intend to develop a career abroad (48.22%) while 31.81% are not decided on this question.

The motivation of the students from different universities varies significantly,

although some could be identified as most important:

- 89.06% the European experience;

- 64.93% the cultural aspect;

- 64.44% future career plan.

60.84% of the students consider that mobility is very important for their future career. Most of them (83.80%) would also find a second mobility as further improving their career perspectives.

41.88% of the students have the perception the selection process reveals to a high degree their potential to succeed as an Erasmus student.

Academic recognition of the studies abroad has been confirmed by 91.69% of the respondents, but there is still a high percentage (8.31%) whose answer was negative to this question.

The students mentioned cultural experience, personal development and improvement of foreign language skills as the most positive aspects of the mobility.

As the most negative aspects of the mobility they mentioned: financial difficulties (insufficient funding, mobility period too short, bureaucratic problems).

89.39% of the respondents consider the contact with a new culture as the major influence of their mobility in terms of personal development. The cultural aspect is also seen by respondents as having the most relevant impact on their future personal development (69.77%).

3.4. ERASMUS Programme in Romania

Romanian national policy in the field of higher education is compatible with the Erasmus Programme objectives. Being declared by all the politicians and by all the main institutions (Parliament, Government, Presidency) as main national priority, the education is close to have a new package of laws regulating all the levels of the system; among them being the law of the higher education system, it is expected to have these laws approved by the Parliament before the Summer 2008. For the moment, over the year 2007, no major influence of the

national policies on Erasmus could be noticed.

Some of the Erasmus complementary actions, like ECTS implementation, Diploma Supplement, are already regulated by laws, as well as the adoption of the Bologna process and the higher education structure on three cycles - undergraduate, master and doctoral school. In 2012, the academic recognition was regulated through the national law.

Administrative data reports that in 2005/06 3.261 – students (with 18, 484.75 – no, of study period months) took part in the ERASMUS programme in 51 universities, The average duration of the ERASMUS study period was 5 months (10 students took part as Erasmus “zero grant” students – with 63 months), The average grant per month per student during our year of reference was €196 (taking into account the average grant per month from PHARE programme – 133 Euro represents 83% from Erasmus the total grant was 329 Euro).

For the academic year 2006/2007 the number of Erasmus students was 3350 (18, 636.25 – number of study period months) took part in the ERASMUS programme in 52 universities, The average duration of the ERASMUS study period was 5 months (29 students took part as Erasmus “zero grant” students – with 125 months), The average grant per month per student during our year of reference was €239 (taking into account the average grant per month from PHARE programme (co-financing funds) – 198 Euro represents 68% from Erasmus the total grant was 437 Euro).

3.5 LLP (Lifelong Learning Programme) - overall programme implementation

Positive and negative effects of the introduction of the integrated LLP on applicants and beneficiaries as compared with the previous generation of separate programmes:

Positive effects: Standardization of the procedures and application forms for many actions (e.g. partnerships, individual mobility for training); Much more flexibility and simplification in the management of funds through the lump sum approach and the 2-years agreements for partnerships ; The integration of the students' placements and staff training within Erasmus, which very much simplifies the access of the beneficiaries; from now on, a student could plan its professional pathway in a coherent approach (studies + placement abroad).

Negative effects: For some of the beneficiaries (running in the same time projects financed under 2007 agreements but also financed from previous programmes), there was a superposition of 2 programmes having different rules, that generated also confusion; In Erasmus, at the beginning, the universities had difficulties to find suitable placement/training organizations, being mainly used in the past to have only links with other universities, not with enterprises, companies etc.

4. Discussions

The National Agency for Community Programmes in the Field of Education and Vocational Training was set up on January 27, 2005 by the Government Decision no.76/27.01.2005. It was created as an institution governed by public law under the coordination of Ministry for Education and Research. The Agency itself has a longer history as it was initially created by unifying the Socrates National Agency and the National Centre for the Leonardo da Vinci Programme. Both of which were in function since 1996. The Romanian National Agency manages at national level the following EC programmes: *Lifelong Learning Programme*; *Youth in Action*; *Erasmus Mundus*; *Europass & Youthpass*; *Eurodesk*.

In line with the Decision on the Integrated Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013 actions are implemented at national level by a network of National

Agencies in the framework of centralised indirect management. In accordance with art.54 of the Financial Regulation and art.38 of its Implementing Rules, the organisation designated as National Agency (NA) by the national authority of the Member State (MS) shall comply with a number of minimum requirements applicable both to the general structure and functioning of the NA, as well as to its management of the programme under the National Agency procedure. Compliance with these requirements is compulsory to ensure sound management of EU funds.

In addition, National Agencies are responsible for the successful implementation of the programme at national level, to ensure an efficient management of EU funds. As such, NAs have to accomplish a number of tasks that will contribute to realizing a high return on investment of the EU funds that they manage.

On the period 1997-2007, the Socrates program, and 2007-2013 LLP programme and its components played an important role in sustaining the main directions of educational system reform. The major contribution of the Socrates program consisted in the development and diversification of international forms of co-operation at the level of all categories of educational institutions. Each component of the program supported this objective through specific activities: partnership projects at pre-university level; institutional contract; theme networks; co-operation network; mobility of teachers, students and pupils (exchanges, study visits, preliminary visits); international co-operation projects. Decentralisation, management and financing educational institution represent another reform priority sustained by all the components of the Program. We are referring to the following types of activities: defining certain institutional development strategies; developing competencies related to identification of needs and areas of interest specific to school as an institution; developing competencies;

developing the curriculum; developing competencies in financial management of educational institutions (administration of financial resources, attracting sources of co-financing); developing partnership with economic agent, local authorities; involving the community in carrying out the projects. Erasmus contributes to teacher training and improvement of teaching methods through: teaching staff mobility; European teaching scholarships for teachers or students from partner institutions; intensive training programs in cross-curricular fields.

4.1. Summary of Erasmus Student - Academic year 2005/2006

The National Agencies reports show that the total number of Erasmus students was 154.421 in 2005/06, an increase of 7.21% compared to the previous year.

Germany was the biggest sender followed by Spain, France and Italy.

All the countries, except Denmark, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, UK and Iceland experienced a growth in outgoing student mobility. The growth rate was highest in Turkey in their 2nd year of participation followed by Cyprus. Generally, there is a high growth rate in the new member states and the candidate countries, on average around 23%. There was a rise in incoming students in all the 31 countries in 2005/06 except Malta, Spain, France and Germany receives most Erasmus students.

In 2005/06, about 0.76% of the total EU31 student population were mobile Erasmus students. However, taking into account the average study duration of approximately 5 months, and the fact that first year students are ineligible for Erasmus grants, it may be estimated that around 3% of European students receive an Erasmus grant at some stage during their studies.

The imbalance between incoming and outgoing students is a problem in many countries but the situation is improving and the gap is narrowing. Education/Teacher training and Medical

Studies are the most underrepresented subject areas of Erasmus, relative to their share in total student population. Average duration of Erasmus mobility was 6.5 months in 2005/06. The average Erasmus student grant was 157€ per month and increased by 12% compared to 2004/05. 117 disabled students participated in the Erasmus programme in 2005/06. In 2005/06 students without an EU grant ("zero-grant" students) were 4% of all Erasmus students.

4.2. Summary of Erasmus Student – Academic year 2006/7

Based on the pre-final figures provided by the National Agencies following a request from the Commission in autumn 2007, and on the reports for the academic year 2006/07 already received (deadline 30 November, 2007) the following trends in Erasmus student mobility in 2006/7 appear to be emerging:

A strong increase of 10% or above is discernible in the following countries: EE, LV, LU, HU, PL, PT, SI and SK, with the highest annual increase of 18.5% in Latvia. A less significant increase is reported in BE, BG, CZ, DK, FR, IT, LT, AT, RO and UK. A decrease or stagnation is reported in DE, EL, ES, IE, CY, MT, NL, FI, SE, IS, NO and TR. Several countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Malta, and Turkey) appear to have joined the group of those with stagnating or falling student mobility numbers.

The trend towards falling student numbers appears to have been halted in certain countries, though without a marked upturns as yet (notably UK, but also Denmark and Sweden). The overall growth rate in student mobility in 2006/7 is only just over 4%, compared with just over 7% the year before.

4.3. Subject areas, duration, grants

4.3.1. Subject areas

Education/Teacher training, Medical Sciences, Mathematics/Computing are underrepresented. More effort could be

made to increase mobility within these disciplines.

Subject areas seem very stable when it comes to mobility. During the period from 2000/01 there has been an increase in Erasmus student of Business Management/Social Science, Engineering/Architecture, Medical Sciences and Math and Computing but a decrease in Arts, Humanities and Languages, Law, Natural Sciences and Law.

4.3.2. Duration

Average duration of Erasmus mobility has changed little since 1994/95. A student spends on average 6.5 months on Erasmus mobility. The EFTA-EEA and candidate countries have on average a shorter duration than the EUR25. The average duration ranges from 4 months to 7.7 months, Spain, Ireland, France and Italy have the longest duration (between 7.7 and 7 months) and Malta, Bulgaria, Latvia, Iceland and the Slovak Republic the shortest (4.8 months or less).

4.3.3. Grants

After many years of decline the average monthly Erasmus grant increased by 12% from the previous year. The average grant in EUR31 is 157€ compared to 140€ last year. The average grant in EUR25 was 153€, 188€ in EFTA-EEA and 262€ in the candidate countries.

Students receive very different amounts in EU grant depending on their home country. The budget a country receives from the EU varies (depending on criteria like size of student population, cost of living, travel distance etc.) and National Agencies have different student allocation policies. Austria, Czech Republic, Spain, and France allocate on average an EU grant of less than or around 100€ per month. In Cyprus, Bulgaria and Latvia the average grant is more than 400€ per month. Of EUR31, 14 countries are already giving an average grant to students above 200€/month. One of the aims in the LLP (2008-2013) is to maintain an average

grant of 200€/month throughout the programme.

During a 19 year period from the academic year 1987/88 till 2005/06 more than 1.5 million students have benefited from the Erasmus programme. More than 780.000 students have participated in Socrates II Programme, which was till the end of the academic year 2006/07. France (15.73%), Germany (15.71), Spain (14.01%) and Italy (11.37%) have proportionally moved most number of students from 1987. The aim was to reach 2 million students by 2008 and a total of 3 million individual participants in student mobility by 2012.

The targets were reached and in 2012, was celebrated the Gala of the Erasmus students, in Bruxelles and in all participating countries in the Erasmus programme.

It is estimated that 65% of Erasmus students are undergraduate students, 34% graduate students and 1% doctoral students. Approximately 60% of Erasmus students are females. This percentage is slightly higher than the proportion of female students of the total EU student population (55%). Since the start of the Erasmus programme in 1987 numbers have increased every year. The growth rate was obviously highest in the beginning.

5. Conclusions

ERASMUS students value their experience abroad highly. They are normally the first in their families to study abroad and assess their period positively in terms of overall experience, learning infrastructure and social integration. They improve their language skills in the languages they already speak and often learn new languages. The period also has a profound impact on their values towards other people, and towards learning and work. There are still important socio-economic barriers in relation to take-up of the programme.

There are, still, however, many students that cannot participate in the programme due to financial reasons. A significant proportion of them knew many

other students who had not participated in the programme for those reasons.

The ERASMUS grant, on average, covers the additional expense of studying abroad. In this respect, the Romanian students who participated in the programme reported the ERASMUS grant as being insufficient.

However, we can say that barriers to take-up of the programme are not only economic but truly socio-economic. Actions to address these may entail therefore not only increasing or better targeting the ERASMUS grant, but also undertaking further dissemination of the programme and its benefits amongst the student population. This may not require great investment from EU institutions, but could entail, for instance, information and feedback sessions from previous ERASMUS students still at university.

The programme is not limited to actions on individual mobility. It has also played a key role in reshaping the face of higher education in the EU and beyond. Erasmus funding is available for projects that boost inter-university co-operation in areas, such as curriculum development and thematic networks.

Erasmus has been a key driver of the “*Bologna process*” a major EU initiative to simplify and improve the quality of higher education. And in the years to come it must continue to help universities modernize to meet changing times. *“We need networks not just of universities but also between universities, research and business, to harness Europe’s potential for creativity and innovation. By kicking off the reforms that we take for granted today, Erasmus has helped to join the three sides of the knowledge triangle – education, research and innovation.”* Figel said.

University reform is necessary in the context of global change. The best universities now compete on a worldwide basis both for students and academic staff, as well as for research funding. Erasmus has a role to play in helping European universities become more active and entrepreneurial in order to capture available opportunities. The

Erasmus programme will continue to expand in the years to come, reaching more students per year. With a budget of EUR 31 billion agreed for 2007-2013, the total number of students mobilized since 1987 is expected to increase to 3 million by 2012. That can only be a good thing for European integration as the next generations of students expand their horizons to new possibilities (The Magazine – number 28).

6. Study Limitations & Further Research Directions

This study reveals a significant correlation between the preference to return, work and study in Romania, on the one hand, and the relations with students’ former university colleagues and the scientific developments in the home country, on the other hand. However, further research is necessary to better understand the impact of the relation type and quality (intensity, consistency, frequency, means of communication etc.) on the propensity to return in one’s home country.

The period of studies time spent abroad is strongly correlated with Romanian students’ career preferences. One could expect their professional preferences to be conditioned by a variety of situational and personal factors. These variables may include certain characteristics of the host country (for instance: the host country’s immigration and naturalization policies and practices, its strategy and policies in the field of research and development, its socio-cultural and economic particularities etc.), the students’ specialization (domain of activity), his/her life stage and family situation, and so on. It was not our objective to identify the independent and/or moderating variables, which influenced the Romanian students’ decision to remain abroad, upon completing their on-going projects. Another study should tackle this issue.

Finally, additional research is necessary to better define the ideas presented in this study. This is important

because our study reveals substantially different view points on certain issues.

The repatriation measures should be gradual and “selective”, encouraging first and foremost the return of the best students, in the priority (or “key”) fields of interest for the country. Therefore, it is important to better understand their expectations. Thus, a more in-depth,

sector-based research, involving (selected) students in certain domains of activity could help determine the priorities for Romania, in order to design efficient action plans. Last, but not least important, the (re)integration issue into the Romanian professional and socio-cultural environment needs additional attention and future investigations.

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