

Evaluation of the Outcome of European Students-Teachers' Participation in the Erasmus Exchange Programme (2008-2011)

A Survey of Students' Knowledge, Thoughts and Feelings before and after their Erasmus Exchange.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to evaluate some teacher-students' outcome of their Erasmus exchange, analyse the practice of the exchange programme, share experiences and good practice and initiate a process of quality assurance for the institutions, the international coordinators and the students. The project is based on a quantitative study. Most of the answers to the questions in the survey are consistent from one year to the next, and there is no significant difference from country to country. The results of this survey should therefore prove useful to many teacher-training institutions.

Introduction

Ever since the Middle Ages, international mobility has been important in formation of scholars. Famous and renowned professors travelled from university to university to learn from each other, exchange ideas and work together with colleagues all over Europe. Thus, internationalisation of higher education and research is not an invention of the 20th century (Cervelló Collazos & Guardia González, 2008). When the new programme for exchange of European students "The European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students" was launched at the Rome conference in 1987, it was in line with a long European tradition. "The Erasmus Programme", as the acronym came to be known, is the modern form of exchange of students and staff. In the European Commission literature it is often referred to as "one of the best-known EU-level actions" and "the European Union's flagship Programme for Mobility and Cooperation in Higher Education across Europe" ("Erasmus. The European Union's flagship Programme for Mobility and Cooperation in Higher Education across Europe 2010/2011," no date). The programme has been very successful. Since the Erasmus Programme started it "has enabled more than 2 million students from across Europe to pursue enriching learning experiences in other countries" (European Commission. Education & Training, 2013b). Therefore, the recent plans for European budget cuts have urged 100 European individuals to

protest, and open letters have been sent to “EU heads of state and government in support of the threatened Erasmus student exchange programme” (European Commission. Education & Training, 2013a). This successful programme is indeed a valuable tool for the different Erasmus networks of teacher-training institutions all over Europe.

The quality of university education and the structure of the European higher education have been the subject of an extensive multidisciplinary literature and have given rise to a number of Community directives and recommendations intended to facilitate, encourage and strengthen the capacity of member countries to improve the level of education and training in Europe. (Europa. Summaries of EU legislation, 2009; European Commission. Education & Training, 2013b). The Erasmus Programme is important because it enables young people to benefit from the diversity of European higher education. The present study relies on research on the quality of University didactics (Delausnay, Sylin, & Wettendorff, 2005; Galliani, 2007; OECD, no date; Semeraro, 2006), and more specifically on the studies concerned with the quality of the Erasmus Programme (Barratt, Chawla-Duggan, Lowe, Nickel, & Ukpo, 2006; Papatsiba, 2005; Teichler & Maiworm, 1997).

An important question for professors at teacher training institutions involved in the Erasmus exchange programme is: Does the Erasmus Programme contribute to the education of the teachers Europe will need tomorrow in a multicultural society? This and other questions about the outcome and practice of the programme were raised on an Erasmus network meeting in 2007. To evaluate the practice of the programme a group of four international coordinators was formed. This resulted in a research project, initially of the descriptive interpretative type, intended to identify knowledge, expectations, opinions, thoughts, feelings and attitudes of students involved in the Erasmus exchanges. The members of the group are Vera Berg, Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Norway, Teresa Grange, Université de la Vallée d'Aoste, Italy, Soledad Guardia González, Universidad Complutense Madrid, Spain and Dominique Trumel, Université de Cergy-Pontoise, France.

The main objectives of the present research are to evaluate student-teachers' outcome of their Erasmus exchange, analyse the practice of the programme within some institutions of an Erasmus network, share experiences and good practice and initiate a process of quality assurance for the institutions, the international coordinators and the students. The evaluation does not aim at a classification of institutions based on adherence to quality standards.

Method

The research was made possible for the following reasons: Every year discussions took place during the network meeting on how the Erasmus exchanges could be improved. The network members were interested in understanding in detail the

different aspects involved in the improvement of the Erasmus project and they were willing to distribute questionnaires to their students and send the completed questionnaires to the research group. As a result, the response rate was more than 95%.

To formulate research questions for a pilot project, a workshop was organised. The workshop generated research questions like: Who are the students going abroad? What are their motives for going abroad? For what reasons do they choose the particular host university? How do they get information about the exchange programme? Are they worried before leaving? Are they concerned about practical problems like money and accommodation? What is the outcome of the exchange? What are the students' positive and negative experiences? What is most important for the students, academic outcome, social experiences or personal development?

To give answers to our questions a quantitative research design was made, intended to identify knowledge, expectations, opinions, thoughts, feelings and attitudes of students involved in the Erasmus exchange. A pilot project was accomplished in 2007-2008. After the pilot project, some minor linguistic adjustments were made. The data were collected in the form of two questionnaires completed by the students before departure and just after their return. The two questionnaires include closed questions and multiple-choice Likert scale items (Likert, 1932):

Questionnaire 1, to be completed by the student before departure, is divided into three sections:

- I-The student's personal data (questions 1 to 12),
- II-The Erasmus Project (questions 13 to 29),
- III-Practical Aspects (questions 30 to 35).

Questionnaire 2, to be completed by the same students upon their return, is divided into four sections:

- I. Personal data (questions 1 and 2)
- II. Erasmus Exchange (questions 3 to 13),
- III. Practical Aspects (questions 14 to 17),
- IV. Personal, Academic, Pedagogical benefits (questions 18 to 22).

The questionnaires are organised so as to enable comparison between the answers given by the students before leaving and after coming back. After the pilot project, data were collected over a period of three academic years 2008-2009, 2009-2010 and 2010-2011.

The total number of students in this survey is 354, and 11 institutions participated. The students were assigned to more than 60 different higher education institutions.

The data of this quantitative survey were analysed in the SPSS programme, used to obtain a descriptive analysis of results corresponding to closed questions. It enables the research group to compare the Erasmus students' experiences before and after the Erasmus stay and to compare these results between institutions. For the overall analysis, the identities of the institutions were kept confidential. To promote self-assessment and self-evaluation, every year each institution received its individual results and the average results from all the institutions.

Results

The survey has produced a wealth of data. The following is a short point-by-point presentation of the most significant results of the survey. It is remarkable that most of the answers to the questions asked in the questionnaires are consistent from one year to the next, and there are not significant differences from country to country. Hence, the results of this survey will apply also for other teacher training institutions than those participating in this project.

The students' personal data

The "typical Erasmus student" in the survey is female, single and aged between 21 and 25. She had more than average experience of travelling abroad and the main motives for travelling before the Erasmus stay, had been tourism and leisure, although about 30 % of them had been abroad for language studies. About half of the students were studying to become primary school teachers and the great majority were bachelor students.

The Erasmus project and exchange

- The students rated the Erasmus Programme as a good programme (see table 2 below).
- A great majority of the students stayed abroad for one semester (4-5 months).
- 67 % of the outgoing students (in average over the three years) scored "high" or "rather high" on questions concerning their feeling of being European (see table 4 below).
- The majority of the students (86 %) made their plans one year or more in advance.
- "To accompany friends" was a motive for less than a third of the students.
- The most important source of information about the Erasmus Programme was friends' reports.
- The most important source of information about the choice of courses was the home university.
- Information provided by home university was more useful than information from the Internet.

- Almost all the students were anxious before leaving (see table 3 below). Nevertheless, when returning, they reported not to have experienced big problems.
- About 12 % of the students did not sign a Learning Agreement before going abroad.
- 50 % of the students changed their Learning Agreement.
- 26,6 % of the students (in average over the three years) did not know before going abroad if the credits in their Learning Agreement would be recognized by their home institution. The figures were decreasing from 39, 8 % the first year, to 20 % the next two years.
- The students did not consider language preparation as an urgent need.
- About 14% of the students had no meeting with the international coordinator at their home institution before leaving.
- 55 % of the students considered the Erasmus grant as not adequate to cover their extra expenses of going abroad.
- 39 % of the students would have participated in a student mobility programme without obtaining an Erasmus grant.
- 25 % of the students did not know that they had to make provisions to be insured before they leave home.

Personal, academic and pedagogical benefits

- The reasons for students to decide to go abroad were more personal than academic.
- Students' most important motives for going abroad were: personal development, to improve their knowledge of languages, to visit a foreign country and to learn about another culture. The less important motives were academic and pedagogical reasons, or problems with the study programme at home.
- Before leaving, the students felt European and after returning 87 % stated that the Erasmus stay made them feel even more European.
- 72 % of the students (in average over the three years) stated that the participation in the Erasmus Programme had encouraged them to work abroad in the future (see table 5 below)

Discussion

Like a lot of other studies evaluating different aspects of the Erasmus Programme, this study shows that the students are very satisfied ("E-Value-ate Your Exchange: Research Report of the ESNSurvey 2010," 2011; Maiworm & Teichler, 1996). Much of what they have learned or experienced, like language learning, sense of European citizenship, exchange of good practice, intercultural dialogue and personal development, is in line with the objectives of "The European Lifelong Learning

Programme”, the wider project Erasmus has been a part of since 2007 (Europa. Summaries of EU legislation, 2009). From the results and the analysis of the data of the survey, four important positive aspects and five negative aspects have been identified.

Positive aspects

1. Erasmus is rated as a good programme

The benefits obtained by the Erasmus stay are numerous. Table 1 shows that more than 75 % of the students assert that the programme met their objectives and expectations, and table 2 shows that the overall evaluation of the programme is very positive.

Table 1

“Did your participation in The Erasmus Programme enable you to achieve your objectives?”

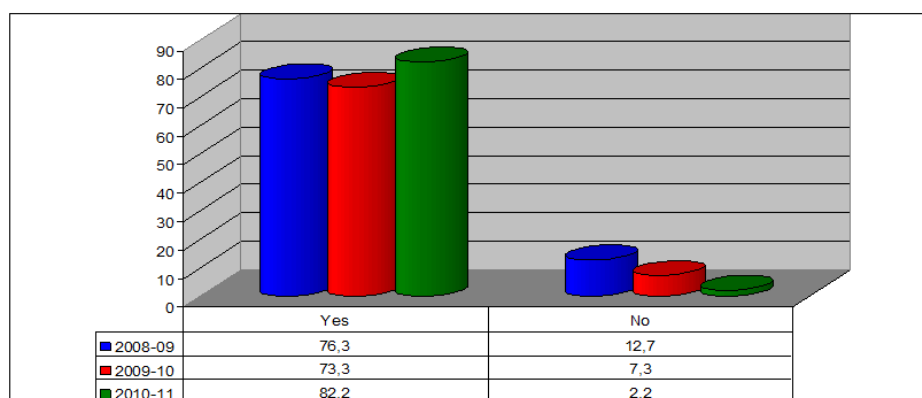
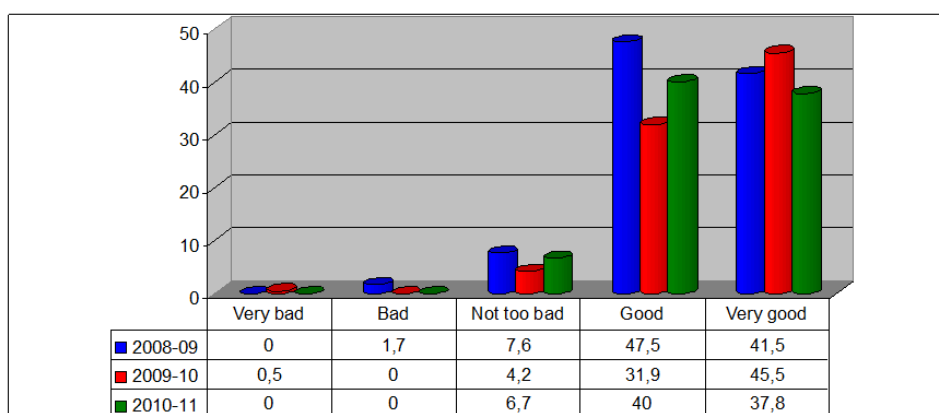


Table 2

“How do you evaluate the programme as a whole?”



2. Personal development

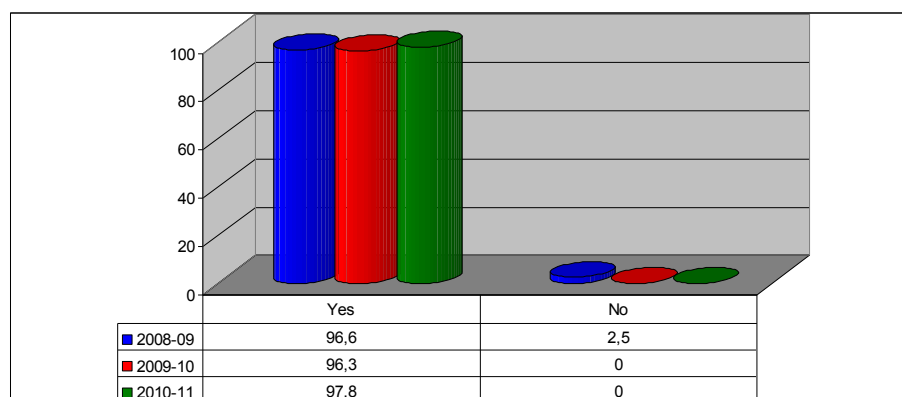
Before leaving, the students were asked about their motives for going abroad. According to the students' priorities, their most important motives are: To improve knowledge of languages, to visit a foreign country, to learn about another culture and personal development. When they return, they confirm the importance of these motives but now the range has slightly changed: Most important is personal development. Then follow language learning, cultural experiences, personal pleasure, social experiences, better multi/intercultural understanding, living independently, getting new foreign friends and better knowledge of the visited country, place or city - all score more than three on a scale of four. It is remarkable that personal benefit is more relevant for the students than academic, pedagogical and professional aspects. Nevertheless, this is in line with many other studies evaluating different aspects of the Erasmus Programme ("E-Value-ate Your Exchange: Research Report of the ESNSurvey 2010," 2011; Maiworm & Teichler, 1996).

3. Building self- confidence

As shown in table 3 almost all the students reported that they were anxious before they left home.

Table 3

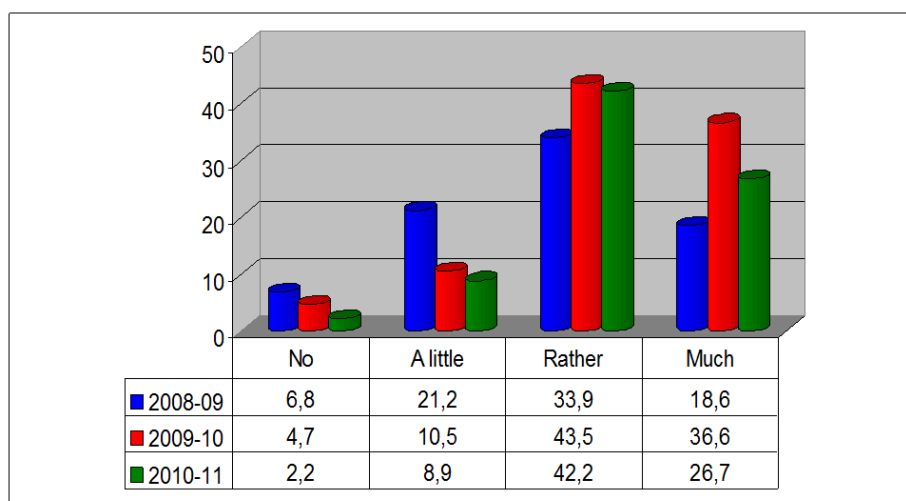
“Are you anxious before leaving?”



They were worried about not having enough money, not finding suitable lodgings, having language problems, not having their credits recognized at their home university when returning or having personal problems like feeling lonely. Nevertheless, after the exchange they did not report substantial problems. Therefore, it is possible that the Erasmus students improved their self-confidence because of the challenges encountered and the problems they were able to solve.

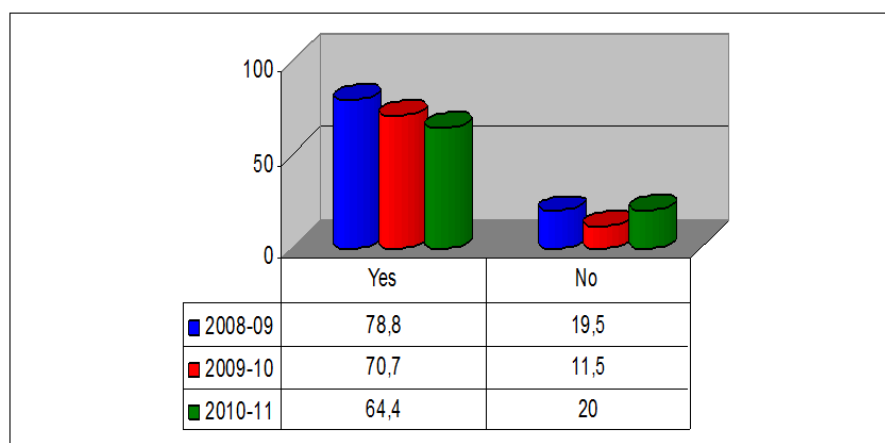
4. The European and intercultural dimension

Table 4
 “Do you feel European?”



As can be seen in table 4 from about 50 % to about 80 % of the students feel “rather” or “much” European. In questionnaire 2, they were asked if the Erasmus stay made them feel “more European”, and after returning 87 % of the students stated that the Erasmus stay made them feel more European.

Table 5
 “Has your participation in The Erasmus Programme encouraged you to work abroad?”



It is demonstrated in table 5 that the participation in the exchange programme encourages most of the students to work abroad in the future. It may indicate that taking part in an Erasmus exchange, contributes to make the students more open-minded and strengthen their intercultural understanding. This is a result similar to what can be found in other studies and is also in line with the Lifelong Learning Programme (Europa. Summaries of EU legislation, 2009)

Negative aspects

From these results, in spite of the overall satisfaction, certain aspects are not as positive as they could be. The survey has identified the following five points to be improved:

1. Personal development versus professional development

As seen previously academic and pedagogical motives seem to be less important for the students when they decide to take part in the Erasmus exchange. Before leaving, the students were asked why they took part in the exchange programme, and on their return, they were asked about personal, academic and pedagogical benefits from the exchange period. Motives like “to improve my CV, to learn about different didactic methods, to enhance my job opportunities, higher quality of the study programme abroad and part of my career planning” were rated under 3 on a scale from 1 - 4. After the exchange period, the same tendency can be observed: Benefits like “improve my bachelor education, higher professional expectations, new methods of teaching, better prepared as a teacher or improve my work opportunities”, all are underrated compared to motives related to personal development. Academic and professional development seems to appear less relevant for the students than personal development, even though the Erasmus Programme is an academic programme.

2. Teaching practice

Only about 50 % of the student-teachers’ in the survey get some teaching practice abroad contrary to what is recommended in ERASMUS Subject Evaluations. (ERASMUS Subject Evaluations. Summary Reports of the Evaluation Conferences by Subject Area, no date). The evaluation recognizes how difficult it might be for students for linguistic reasons in most countries to take charge of a class. Even though, the report urge the importance of some sort of practice for the Erasmus students.

3. The students’ preparation for their stay abroad

Some of the students had no information meeting before leaving. The rest of the Erasmus students rate the information received at the information meeting about academic aspects as just a little above average. When they return, they assess the information they received as not as adequate as they first thought.

After the stay the students report that they had problems with language, that is to say they realize that their preparation was not sufficient even though one of their main reasons for going abroad was to learn a foreign language, a point which is stressed in the objectives of the Lifelong Learning Programme (Europa. Summaries of EU legislation, 2009).

4. Information and website

In the first year of the survey, the students gathered information about the host university from the internet. It is remarkable that the students in the two following years turned to their home institution to get information. It may indicate that the role

of the internet is not as important as it might have been if we refer to the Lifelong Learning Objective no. 7: "support the development of ICT-based resources." (Europa. Summaries of EU legislation, 2009).

5. Learning Agreement and credit recognition

The Erasmus Students' Charter recognizes as students' rights the fact of signing a Learning Agreement and recognizing the students' credits. ("Erasmus student charter," no date). Though a majority of the students signs a Learning Agreement, still a minority of them does not sign. Fortunately, their number is decreasing. More than half of the students who do sign, have to change their Learning Agreement because the courses chosen are not available or because the information given before leaving was inadequate. Some of the students leave their home institution not knowing whether their credits will be recognized. When they come back, some of them see that their fear was well founded, as some of the credits are not recognized.

Suggestions for improvements

The Erasmus stay should be prepared along two lines, one administrative and one academic. It is the responsibility of the international team to inform all students in the institution of the existence of the Erasmus Programme and to facilitate students' mobility. It is therefore important that an annual evaluation of the procedures should be made in order to increase the quality of the Erasmus exchange. It is the responsibility of each institution to provide guidelines for the organisation of its improvement. Nevertheless, academic information should be the responsibility of the academic international coordinator for the pedagogical aspects of the student's programme and language preparation. No student should leave the university without a signed Learning Agreement with the assurance that the credits acquired in the foreign university will be recognized by the home institution.

Considering the professional and academic aspects, the academic international coordinator, has to stress the importance of the academic aspects and should not let the student forget that Erasmus is an academic programme. More emphasis should therefore be put on the academic issues and preparation, including language preparation and teaching practice. In our teacher training institutions all Erasmus students should have some practice, for instance to study the school system and observe how a school is organised, how lessons are taught and how classes are managed, as stated in the Erasmus subject evaluation. (ERASMUS Subject Evaluations. Summary Reports of the Evaluation Conferences by Subject Area, no date). According to the same report, children would also benefit from having a foreign student teacher in their class, giving them more intercultural insight.

An informative website is of particular importance to foreign students. When analysing the data from the survey, it is surprising to find that the students during the three years relied less and less on information found on the Internet in their choice of courses at the host university. The international team should therefore check that

websites are regularly updated so that they present reliable information about which courses are available when foreign students arrive at their host universities. Not only websites, but also blogs and virtual campuses should be more widely used and regularly updated.

Conclusion

The benefits from the Erasmus student exchange programme are numerous. As we have seen, the students evaluate their personal development as the most important outcome. It should be underlined that personal development is important for a teacher student in her/his future profession. However, benefits like language learning, cultural experiences, social experiences, better multi/intercultural understanding, better knowledge of the visited country, strengthen and building international network, all score more than there on a scale of four. As a consequence, considering the Erasmus Programme as implemented in the teacher-training institutions in this survey, the following conclusions may be drawn:

- The Erasmus students gain personal and professional benefits.
- The students obtain an understanding and a feeling of belonging to a larger community.
- The students who have participated in mobility programs are better prepared to accept foreign cultures.

There are some practical and formal elements in the organization of the study that limit the development of mobility, for example accommodation, insurance and the amount of the Erasmus grant.

According to the results of this survey, we may conclude that the Erasmus Programme contributes to the education of teachers that the multicultural society of Europe will need in the future.

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