



This paper is taken from

*Human Rights and Citizenship Education
Proceedings of the eleventh Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2009

edited by Peter Cunningham, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 978-0-9562789-6-8

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Bauer, T. & Kreuz, A. (2009) Diversity in ERASMUS-student courses. A comparative study reflecting the differences and similarities of international student courses at four European Universities in view of a new ERASMUS mobility, in Ross, A. (ed) Human Rights and Citizenship Education. London: CiCe, pp 300 - 305

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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Diversity in ERASMUS student mobility: A comparative study reflecting the differences and similarities of international teacher student courses and University concepts at four European Universities in view of a new ERASMUS mobility project.

Thomas Bauer and Alexandra Kreuz
University of Teacher Education (Austria)

Abstract

In a common Europe for students it becomes more and more important to gain study-experience in a foreign country. This paper reflects in a first step on the current state of ERASMUS-student mobility in Europe. As a second step courses of four European Universities designed for ERASMUS-students are compared with the purpose to find out the differences and similarities. Therefore a questionnaire has been designed and data from universities in Austria, Finland, Spain and Turkey have been collected and compared. The paper presents a first outcome of these data and reflects on the next planned steps of this research. The most important aim is to enlarge the sample and develop comparable elements for an improved academic recognition and a better use of ECTS.

Introduction

Without doubt, it has become important for students to gain study-experience abroad in another European country. This paper looks, as a first step, at the current state of ERASMUS student mobility in Europe and calls for a new ERASMUS concept in the near future. Recent studies (UK Socrates-ERASMUS Council, 2005; See Bauer, 2009) show that the subject areas Education/Teacher Training are insufficiently represented compared to other study fields at European universities.

Therefore, as a second step, courses and academic concepts of four European Universities especially designed for ERASMUS students are compared with the purpose to find out the differences and similarities. A qualitative questionnaire has been designed and data from universities in Austria, Finland, Spain and Turkey have been collected and analysed.

The paper presents a first outcome of these data and outlines further research to be undertaken. The most important aims of this research are a revision and adaptation of the inventory; an enlargement of the sample of the pilot-study to gain data from other European countries; designing a basic module with sub-modules which will be recognised at Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Europe. Facilitating the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) procedure and the development of comparable elements for improved academic recognition and better use of ECTS-system are additional *desiderata*. If successful, the outcomes of our work should be to stronger motivation and effective promotion of future ERASMUS mobility.

The current state of ERASMUS student mobility in Europe

During the past 20 years ERASMUS has been a success story and, as Jan Figel put it, "Erasmus has been and remains a key factor in the internationalisation and somehow "Europeanisation" of the EU's higher education systems" (Jan Figel, 2007, p 1).

ERASMUS enhances organised student mobility. As an example of "good practice" it is necessary that the home university and the partner university abroad facilitate organisational agenda for the ERASMUS students, e.g. through counselling and support concerning practicalities such as help with administrative matter and accommodation. Universities should also counsel the students concerning their choice of courses (Teichler, 2007, p 162).

Teichler (2007, p 143) states that altogether ERASMUS students reported positive experiences concerning their study abroad. About 20% of them mentioned serious problems with accommodation, financial and administrative agenda, too many contacts with students of their home-country and problems with the academic recognition of their studies abroad.

Regarding the VALERA-evaluation study, Teichler (2007, p 187) summarizes that most of the experts interviewed wonder whether the success of ERASMUS will stand the test of time when taking into

account the decline of study months abroad over the years. However, they are convinced that ERASMUS can still play a big role in future if some necessary quality improvements are carried out.

Teichler (2007, p 187) proposes amongst other measures to be taken better preparation of the students and better administrative and financial support of the students during their ERASMUS-stay. Moreover, a higher quality of the form/structure of study courses, a better embedding in the study process and specific curricula as well as a better academic recognition are worth considering.

UNI-Kurier (Kurier, 5.3.2009, p 13) reports that there is a new trend in the choice of where to spend the ERASMUS-semester: not only Madrid, Paris or London are favoured, but also the Eastern European countries are becoming more and more popular with ERASMUS students, and this for very good reasons: impressive cultural experiences; lower accommodation and living costs; a good investment considering business careers in the future markets.

Bracht *et al* (2006, p 24) state, “thus, the time seems to be ripe for another major approach of ERASMUS student mobility, where more ambitious curricular aims will be intertwined with the financial support for mobile students.”

At the ERASMUS Coordinators Conference 2008 in Lisbon, Castro e Brito and Palma (2008) pointed out some obstacles to mobility: insufficient financial support, difficulties with academic recognition of qualifications achieved abroad at many home universities; lack of learning agreements and/or inflexible curricula. Also different academic calendars/time sheets, language barriers and lack of information are mentioned as obstacles. The authors therefore call for improvements concerning language and cultural preparation, information and support measures, academic recognition and “windows of mobility” in the Bachelor and Master programmes.

Wuttig and Garbe (2005, p 12) recommend developing (international) degree programmes with “windows of mobility” (compulsory in some subject areas), including special modules which can be studied abroad (the modules should fit into one semester); developing joint or double degree programmes; introduction of shorter periods of studies abroad; improvement of academic recognition, e.g. through better use of ECTS and learning outcomes.

Regarding the number of Erasmus Students defined by subject areas (Education, Teacher Training) there has been a decline of Erasmus student numbers since the year 1997 up to now (2007) (UK Socrates-Erasmus Council, 2005, p 47; Seebauer, 2009, p 13). The UK Socrates-ERASMUS Council (2005, p 24) found that the subject area Education/ Teacher Training is underrepresented compared to other study fields at European universities. The Work Group pointed out three facts among other things as obstacles:

- a) Educational systems in various countries are not compatible.
- b) The area of teaching practice, its provision and assessment, can be a major stumbling block and
- c) The lecturers in home institutions are concerned that students who study abroad do not get the same level of attention as at the host institutions (2005, p. 24).

Methods

We designed in a first draft a qualitative questionnaire of 15 questions regarding ERASMUS student courses and university concepts.

Participants

The international relations coordinators from the following universities took part in the initial data collecting with the questionnaire and filled in the questions:

Austria: Pädagogische Hochschule Wien, Büro für Internationale Beziehungen (University of Education Vienna, International Relations Office)

Turkey: Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi (Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Faculty of Education)

Spain: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Autonomous University of Barcelona, Faculty of Sciences of Education, International Relations Office)

Finland: Helsingin yliopisto, Soveltavan kasvatustieteen laitos (University of Helsinki, Department of Applied Sciences of Education)

Results

In the following, the major results gathered from the questionnaire are summarized:

Question 1: Which courses are especially offered for ERASMUS students?

Vienna University of Teacher Education (PH Wien) offers three different courses for ERASMUS-students that were especially designed for the needs of international students. They are remains of former multilateral international projects. Courses offered by the department of English language and methodology are frequently taken by ERASMUS students as well. As the strategy of the university has undergone changes over the last two years, more students from CEE-countries with German as a second language take part in the regular courses offered.

At Canakkale University there are 20 different courses (19 optional and one compulsory) on offer for international students. We suppose that they were not developed for ERASMUS students exclusively, but that these are the courses delivered in English and German.

The University of Helsinki offers nine courses each semester which are open for ERASMUS students.

Autonomous University of Barcelona offers an "International Module" based on cross-curricular subjects addressed to Primary School trainees, but also for students of General Education in general. The international courses have 5 related subjects.

Question 2: Since which year have you offered these courses?

Comparing the years when these courses were installed, we find a range between the results from 2002 to 2008: At Canakkale University these courses have been offered since 2003; at PH Vienna the courses have been offered since 2002; at Helsinki University since 2005; Autonomous University of Barcelona started special offers in 2008 (spring term) but already since 2002 two subjects in English have addressed international students.

Question 3: In which language/s are these courses held at your university?

At Canakkale University the courses are held in English, German and Turkish; at Helsinki University the courses are held in English; at Autonomous University of Barcelona the International Module is held in English except the intensive course of Catalan language; at PH Wien the international courses are held in German and English.

Question 4: What are the course contents?

Looking at the course contents, we can find the following:

Students in Vienna, Barcelona and Helsinki receive theoretical background information about the country, including its' historical development and education system. In these three universities multi- and intercultural aspects of education are also focussed on.

PH Wien, Canakkale University and Autonomous University of Barcelona offer language courses for international students.

In all of the four universities international students can undertake their teaching practice.

Question 5: How many teachers/lecturers are involved?

Comparing the number of teachers/lecturers involved in ERASMUS-courses there is a broad spectrum: at Canakkale University a maximum of 35 lecturers are concerned; at Helsinki University ten lecturers are occupied with these courses; at Autonomous University of Barcelona there are around 12 because these teaching hours do not count in the teaching plan of lecturers, so they offer their free-time to do this. That is why they cannot appoint too many hours to only one teacher. They are trying to include this workload in the regular teaching schedule, but have not succeeded yet. These hours are recognised as additional workload but do not imply to have less hours of teaching with national students; in Vienna, five specially trained lecturers are permanently involved. In all other courses the students are integrated in the regular study-courses together with the regular students, so the involvement of University staff is not limited in number.

Question 6: How many ECTS-Credits can be obtained for taking part in these courses?

Regarding the obtainable ECTS-credits, differences between the universities can be observed: At Canakkale University there are no especially designed courses for international students except the compulsory language course, but a wide variety of courses held in German or English are offered, which is very helpful when designing study-plan for potential ERASMUS students.

At Helsinki University 35 ECTS can be obtained. At the Autonomous University of Barcelona a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 30 ECTS can be obtained. At PH Wien ERASMUS students may receive a minimum of 15 up to 33 ECTS.

Question 8: What are the benefits ERASMUS students take from these courses?

Concerning the benefits that ERASMUS students can gain from these courses, congruencies at all four universities are found: getting to know the education system and different culture, excursions, added value being part in an international group (friendship, networking, etc.).

At Canakkale University ERASMUS students can participate as researchers in postgraduate programmes. At PH Wien especially the students from CEE-countries may profit in taking part in the regular study courses because of their good language skills in German (German as a second language).

Question 9: How do ERASMUS students work in these courses? (E.g. work groups, presentations, self guided studies etc.)

In all four universities students take part in work-groups, do oral and written presentations and take part in lectures and/or discussions. Regarding teacher education, international students team up with mentor teachers in schools.

At Helsinki University there is a focus as well on drama activities such as role play. At Canakkale University students have to do case studies.

Question 10: Which excursions do you offer to ERASMUS students?

All four universities offer excursions to places of historical/geographical interest or school-related excursions. Furthermore, Helsinki University offers visits at welfare institutions and places of religious worship. The ERASMUS student network helps in Vienna/Austria and Spain to widen the variety of excursion opportunities.

Question 11: Which facts & figures about your country (e.g. the culture, characteristics) do ERASMUS students need to gain new insights?

The question concerning facts and figures of the host country rendered similar results in all four universities: ERASMUS students get an insight into the geography, demography, history, school/education system and religion/s of the country.

Question 12: Who takes care of the ERASMUS students?

At all four universities the International Offices take care of the students. In Helsinki there is an International Student Service helpdesk. At Canakkale, Barcelona and Vienna University former ERASMUS students are connected to the incoming international students. The ERASMUS student network and links to the University of Vienna are available as well.

Question 13: How is the integration of the Incomings into the university realised?

At Wien and Helsinki students get information on how to get into contact with Austrian/Finnish native students and daily academic life in an Orientation course. It seems that at Barcelona, Helsinki and Canakkale University the students are more considered as an international group. This is very much linked to language barriers, whereas in Vienna due to the fact that around 80% of the students have German as a first foreign language they can very well participate in the ordinary academic life together with Austrian students. Integration into regular academic life depends very much on the length of stay.

Question 14: In which areas do you see problems?

The areas where problems occur are multifaceted: at Canakkale University the Erasmus Student and Teaching Mobility Programme is quite a new issue, and therefore not much experience has been gathered so far.

Helsinki University requests more interaction between the Erasmus students and their degree students. A major problem in Helsinki is that ERASMUS students do not follow the term dates of the host university. When students do not adapt to the host university scheme, problems and extra work for both - the administration and the students - are evident.

At Autonomous University of Barcelona the main problem is that the motivation and attitude of ERASMUS students are not very close to reality. Some are surprised by the normal workload and the strictness of the teachers which do not fit their stereotypes. This problem might become bigger as in some countries a stay in another EU-country becomes a requirement for completing a degree.

For PH Wien problems only occur when the language competencies are too poor to follow the lectures or students have not made contacts with the lecturers at the beginning of the semester and are surprised when they have to sit for their exams before leaving.

Question 15: Can you suggest some improvements concerning ERASMUS student-mobility? If yes, which ones?

The suggested improvements concerning ERASMUS student-mobility are the following: at Canakkale University there is more need for a more structured coordination in order to meet the increase of incoming ERASMUS students.

Helsinki University recommends better coordination between the partner universities. Autonomous University of Barcelona thinks that bureaucracy and the process of learning agreements should be simplified. Also better preparation of the incoming ERASMUS students in terms of knowledge and expectations about the host country and institution are required. PH Wien recommends better preparation in the home institution about bureaucratic requirements (learning agreement and recognition of diplomas), specific language needs and financial support.

Conclusions and recommendations

The aim of this study was to take a closer look at the similarities and differences in the four European Universities concerning the courses and University concepts for ERASMUS students. A summary of the findings listed above shows that similarities in all four universities are found concerning the form how ERASMUS students have to work in these courses, the excursions offered and the transferred facts and figures of the host country. At all four Universities the International Relations Office take care about the students. Besides at Canakkale, Barcelona and Vienna former ERASMUS students team up with the incoming students as study guides (buddies/tutors). ERASMUS students therefore profit from getting to know and understanding the education system of the host university/country, the different culture and the fringe benefit of being part in an international multicultural group.

Differences between the participating Universities are obvious concerning the number of courses for ERASMUS students exclusively, the number of lecturers involved in ERASMUS-courses and also the obtainable ECTS-credits.

Much depends on the modules' design for international students, the experience of international project work and the ERASMUS strategy of the university.

The chosen language of intercommunication is English in all four Universities. In Vienna and Canakkale German is offered as a first/second language. Moreover in three of the four Universities (Barcelona, Canakkale and Vienna) mother tongue language courses are offered for the ERASMUS students as well.

The realisation of the integration of the incoming students into university life seems to be dependent to a large degree on the language skills of the individual ERASMUS student, the quality of the information given on how to get into contact with the host institution students and also on the length of their stay.

Problems occur when there is a lack of experience in the host university concerning ERASMUS student and Teaching Mobility Programmes and not enough interaction between the ERASMUS students and the other degree students. When students do not adapt to the term dates of the host university and into the host university calendar, extra work for the administration and the students is inevitable. This often leads to negative attitudes concerning the host-university or the guest-student and might foster stereotypes.

Misguided motivational and attitudinal reasons of the ERASMUS students and poor language competencies are often creating barriers between students and lecturers, ERASMUS students and host institution students and/or administrative staff. Therefore improvement should be implemented in the structural coordination, in a better coordination between the partner universities, in facilitating bureaucracy and the procedure of learning agreements. Besides a better preparation of the ERASMUS students of what to expect from the host institution are suggested. Furthermore specific language needs and financial support are a prerequisite for a successful stay abroad.

One outcome of this study could be the initiation and development of minimal standards concerning the recognition of the academic workload of the studies abroad. This would minimize the paper work for international offices and students. Moreover it would lessen the evident and understandable anxiety of the student when returning home that their studies are not fully recognised.

Based on the results of this qualitative research, we would suggest the implementation of the following courses that should be available each semester at all Universities in Europe holding an EUC-Charta:

- a language course module (5 ECTS-credits),

- a cultural studies/citizenship education module (5 ECTS-credits) and
- a teaching practice module (5 ECTS-credits).

This would amount to 50% of an average semester student workload and then additional courses could be tailored more easily to the needs of the individual student. The contents of these three standard-courses should be outlined clearly in the EUC-Charta of the universities.

We are intending to gather more data from more universities more specifically what these qualitative aspects should be and how they could be implemented at an institutional level.

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