

ERASMUS PROGRAMME – THE OPPORTUNITY TO GAIN PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Erasmus is a part of the Lifelong Learning Programme. Erasmus was first created in 1987 as a European Programme of Students' Exchange and developed gradually from a sub-programme of Socrates to a sectoral programme of LLP in 2007. There are currently more than 2000 higher education institutions participating in Erasmus and 1.4 million students have participated in the programme so far. The EU budget of Socrates/Erasmus for 2000-2006 amounted to around 950 Mio Euro. The Erasmus programme has recently opened a new initiative – students' placement. The three involved parties – the School (sending institution), a student (beneficiary) and a company/organization (receiving institution) benefit from the action. The main problems in taking the challenge of Erasmus Mobility by students are analysing in this article.

KEYWORDS: Erasmus, Lifelong Learning Programme, European Commission, students' placement, students' exchange.

Introduction

If we would like to explain the idea of Erasmus programme in one word, we should say „mobility”. In every dictionary one can find the definition of mobility – the ability to move easily from one job, area, or social class to another¹. How does the Erasmus programme refer to the definition? It is done through its decentralised activities such as: students, teachers and other staff mobility. Apart from those mentioned above, Erasmus programme offers also more possibilities of scientific cooperation as e.g. Erasmus Intensives Programmes or Curriculum Development. However, refereeing to the subject of my article the “mobility” has a crucial meaning for Erasmus students' professional future. This year a new action was added to Erasmus programme which official name is “Student Placements”. This created new opportunities for student in gaining professional experience.

In order to explain these opportunities, it is necessary to understand the idea of the Erasmus programme, offered possibilities of exchanges and its origins as well as its popularity among students in Europe.

A Brief history of Erasmus Programme

Erasmus is a part of the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) which main aim is to strengthen the quality of education as well as facilitate international cooperation and exchange in the field of education. The LLP was created by the European Commission as a programme integrating its various educational and training initiatives.

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gramme of LLP in 2007. Today Erasmus supports the international cooperation of higher education institutions in the 27 Member States of the European Union, the European Economic Area countries (Iceland, Lichtenstein and Norway) and the candidate country – Turkey.

Erasmus Programme actions

Higher Education Institution which applied for Erasmus University Charter is entitled to benefit from various actions of the Erasmus Programme.

The most popular is **students' exchange** within partner universities – students conduct part of their studies abroad with a financial support from the programme. Recently, the **students placements** in partner institutions and companies in European countries have joined the Erasmus and gained students' interest. The internships are organized based on the official “Quality Commitment” which replicates the principles of the European Quality Charter for Mobility.

It is also vital to mention in brief the other actions offered by the programme which are as follows:

- Teacher Mobility
- Other Staff Mobility
- Erasmus Intensive Programmes
- Multilateral Projects
- Thematic Network

All these actions are co-financed by the European Commission.

The basic statistics on Students' Exchanges in Europe

There are currently more than 2000 higher education institutions participating in Erasmus and 1.4 million students have participated in the programme so far. The EU budget of Socrates/Erasmus for 2000-2006 amounted to

¹ Longman. Dictionary of Contemporary English.

around 950 Mio Euro (of which approximately 750 Mio Euro for student grants)².

The present goal of the European Commission is to reach 3 million Erasmus students by 2012.

Erasmus student mobility in Europe in 2005/06: outgoing and incoming students per country

Kraj		Liczba studentów wyjeżdżających	Liczba studentów przyjeżdżających	Różnica między liczbą wyjazdów a liczbą przyjazdów	Stosunek liczby przyjeżdżających do wyjeżdżających (%)
Country		Number of outgoing students	Number of incoming students	Difference	Incoming/outgoing students ratio (%)
Austria	AT	3 971	3 735	236	94,06%
Belgia	BE	4 971	5 087	-116	102,33%
Bulgaria	BG	882	250	632	28,34%
Cypr	CY	133	125	8	93,98%
Czechy	CZ	4 725	2 613	2 112	55,30%
Dania	DK	1 682	4 356	-2 674	258,98%
Estonia	EE	511	372	139	72,80%
Finlandia	FI	3 851	5 736	-1 885	148,95%
Francja	FR	22 501	21 420	1 081	95,20%
Grecja	GR	2 714	1 899	815	69,97%
Hiszpania	ES	22 891	26 611	-3 720	116,25%
Holandia	NL	4 491	6 965	-2 474	155,09%
Irlandia	IE	1 567	3 870	-2 303	246,97%
Islandia	IS	194	256	-62	131,96%
Lichtenstein	LI	30	31	-1	103,33%
Litwa	LT	1 910	626	1 284	32,77%
Luksemburg	LU	146	15	131	10,27%
Lotwa	LV	681	258	423	37,89%
Malta	MT	149	295	-146	197,99%
Niemcy	DE	23 848	17 879	5 969	74,97%
Norwegia	NO	1 412	2 260	-848	160,06%
Polska	PL	9 974	3 063	6 911	30,71%
Portugalia	PT	4 312	4 542	-230	105,33%
Rumunia	RO	3 261	653	2 608	20,02%
Słowacja	SK	1 165	508	657	43,61%
Słowenia	SI	879	589	290	67,01%
Szwecja	SE	2 530	7 048	-4 518	278,58%
Turcja	TR	2 852	828	2 024	29,03%
Węgry	HU	2 658	1 554	1 104	58,47%
Wielka Brytania	UK	7 131	16 386	-9 255	229,79%
Włochy	IT	16 389	14 591	1 798	89,03%

Prepared by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System, Unit of European Programmes for Higher Education, Warsaw.

Source: http://www.erasmus.org.pl/s/p/artykuly/54/54/Erasmus_2005-06_STUD_i_NAUCZ.pdf

²Source: the European Commission website

There are still many countries whose balance is adverse. It means that there are more in-coming than outgoing students. This tendency is noticed in the Western and Northern European countries mostly. The possible reasons of the situation may be connected with the bigger interest in mobility among students from the Eastern European Countries. Students find these exchanges as a first step to their international carriers and still in such countries like eg. Poland, studies or placement abroad highlight their job application among others in a difficult labour market.

Erasmus impact on students' professional carriers

The new Erasmus programme within the LLP also offers placements abroad. This new action which was previously carried out under the Leonard da Vinci Programme (before 2007), in comparison to the Leonardo formal requirements (applications forms, budgets, financing, etc.) is now much easier to conduct. In the same time, the interest in the activities is enhanced among HEIs and other institutions. Students' placements are the obvious way of gaining the professional experience. However, they also have an added value presented below.

The Erasmus mobility enables students to:

- improve the knowledge of foreign language;
- set new contacts;
- improve ability of taking decisions and finding innovative solutions;
- learn about new cultures and international business system;
- to broaden their horizons;
- to gain courage in taking up challenges;
- to learn financial independence;
- many others.

The placements offered with Erasmus programme must meet a few requirements. These are the basics:

- compliance with rules written in the Quality Commitment Card²;
- connection of placement to the student's field of studies;
- ability to gain experience in the field of studies.

At Katowice School of Economics students' attention is drawn to the importance of gaining professional experience during the studies. The School is aware of the fact that students must be informed properly about the labour market needs and the possibilities within the School. The information campaign which is one of the element of building students' awareness in that matter starts in the first months of studies. At the beginning, students are obliged to participate in a training conducted by Students' Service and International Office. Then during the studies, Katowice School of Economics (KSE), according to the Polish Ministry of Higher Education requirements, introduced obligatory student internships

which could be taken either in Poland or abroad. The period of internships is established according to internal regulations and the average minimum required for placement is 6 weeks. The Erasmus requires minimum 3 months – 12 weeks. The role of International Office and Students' Carrier Office is to help students in finding and organizing the placement. Therefore, Erasmus programme is a perfect tool to reach the goal.

The financial support from the European Commission which is granted to an intern and School (Organizational Management Funds) enables to take advantage of the unique opportunity. The amount of the grant is an encouraging factor for students and for potential employer as well. The company/institution hosting the students for their placements gains temporary employees at lower costs.

Although, KSE also introduced an obligatory subject to curriculum – "Introduction to the labour market", which is credited, the School enhances students' mobility in all possible aspects as well.

From the employer's point of view, a CV where the information of student's placement is contained, especially taken abroad, is always more valuable and worth deeper attention. The students are not always aware of the fact therefore the role of HEIs is to build this awareness.

The main problems in taking the challenge of Erasmus Mobility by students

There are, however, many obstacles which either discourage or unable students to benefit from the exchange.

The most arduously problems are the following:

- **Lack of additional financial resources.**

As Erasmus scholarship as a rule doesn't cover the whole living costs abroad, many students resign from applying because of financial reasons. Although, they don't pay the tuition fee at the host university, the studies at home university are also expensive. Some students save money a few months before departure, some take additional jobs during the summer in order to earn some money. In the end, however, those solutions can not be taken by everybody due to the different reasons.

This obstacle doesn't refer to Erasmus placement. The scholarship in that case allows the student to cover his/her living costs.

- **Insufficient knowledge of foreign language.**

The knowledge of language is a basic requirement during the application process and a crucial factor which will allow the student to benefit from the studies. Unfortunately, practice shows that knowledge of foreign language is on the intermediate level in vast majority of cases. The intermediate level is the required minimum for Erasmus students. Students are still afraid of taking studies, internships in a language that they don't understand fluently.

- **Immaturity.**

The average age of Erasmus student is 23 (between 20 – 25). Before sending students abroad it is vital to

² http://www.erasmus.org/pl/s/p/artykuly/13/135/5.1b_qc.doc

check if he/she is mature enough in order to cope with all the problems that may appear. Unfortunately, the level of maturity among students of the same age is different. Some of them are still dependent on their parents and homesick doesn't allow them to benefit from the students' life abroad.

- **Low awareness of mobility possibilities.**

Some students don't apply for Erasmus activities just because they are not aware of such possibilities. Although, International Offices take many promotional actions, some students don't look for mobility possibilities on their own.

- **Lack of adventure spirit.**

The Erasmus adventure requires courage. Fear is sometimes discouraging many students.

Those problems are often noticed by our International Office during the interviews with students applying for Erasmus activities, foreign internships and etc. or are written in their reports after they return.

Conclusions

The Erasmus programme has recently opened a new initiative – students' placement. The three involved parties – the School (sending institution), a student (beneficiary) and a company/organization (receiving institution) benefit from the action. The School develops their offer and in the same time is more attractive for students. The students gain professional experience required in the future on the labour market and in the same time improve their "soft skills" like entrepreneurship, creativity, language, etc. The receiving company may at a lower cost possess a good, temporary employee who in future may decide to apply for a regular job in the company.

The important problem regarding the Erasmus placement and generally Erasmus offer is the awareness of students. It's HEIs' responsibility to build an appropriate information system which will provide information to the students on the possibility of gaining new experiences during studies. The system should overcome the most common discouraging factors as well – inform about other possible funding sources, help in improving the language competences before the students' departure and offer trainings, meetings with former Erasmus students, tutoring system which will develop a mature attitude in out-going students.

The main idea of the Erasmus programme was "mobility" from the beginning. Studying abroad was the first step. Nowadays the offer is still growing.

In the globalization era, internationalization of studies and professional experience become the required factor on the labour market.

Literature

1. www.erasmus.org.pl
2. http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/llp/erasmus/erasmus_en.html
3. <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/index.htm>

ERASMUS PROGRAMA – GALIMYBĖ ĮGYTI PROFESINĘ PATIRTĮ

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S a n t r a u k a

Erasmus programa skirta aukštojo mokslo kokybės užtikrinimui studentų, dėstytojų ir kito personalo mobilumo skatiniui, daugiašaliui aukštojo mokslo institucijų (AM) bendradarbiavimui tarpusavyje ir su verslo įmonėmis bei laipsnių skaidrumo ir suderinamumo tarp aukštojo mokslo ir profesinio mokymo užtikrinimui. 2007 metais startavo nauja Erasmus veikla – studentų praktika. Straipsnio tikslas – atlikti Erasmus programos problemų analizę. Šiandien Erasmus palaiko aukštojo mokslo institucijų tarptautinį bendradarbiavimą 27 Valstybėse narėse. Yra daug šalių, kuriose daugiau atvykstančių nei išvykstančių studentų. Ši tendencija daugiau pastebima Vakarų ir Šiaurės Europos šalyse. Daugiau išvykstančių nei atvykstančių studentų posocialistinėse šalyse. Atlikus ES šalių atvykstančių/išvykstančių studentų proporcijų analizę, buvo nustatyta, kad didžiausias skirtumas išvykstančių studentų naudai yra Lenkijoje ir Vokietijoje, atvykstančių studentų naudai – Danija, Jungtinė Karalystė. Svarbiausios studentų mobilumo organizavimo problemos: papildomų finansinių išteklių trūkumas, nepakankamos anglų kalbos žinios, maža studentų moralinė branda, menkas mobilumo galimybių supratimas, nuotykių dvasios trūkumas. Šios problemos yra dažnai pastebimos Katowicų aukštosios ekonomikos mokyklos darbuotojų, kalbant su studentais, besikreipiančiais dėl Erasmus galimybių, praktikos užsienyje ir taip toliau, ar yra parašytos jų ataskaitose po to, kai jie sugrįžta iš stažuotės užsienyje.