

## **Session 8:** Workshop 1

**Title:** Does Erasmus meet its objectives?

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### ***AIMS OF THE EU'S SOCRATES/ERASMUS PROGRAMMES***

- To promote mobility of staff and students between European universities and institutes of higher education
- To promote co-operation between universities and institutions of higher education
- To bring a European dimension to students and teachers in Europe through the development of new curricula, intensive programmes, joint degrees, etc.
- To reduce obstacles to co-operation and mobility in Europe where they exist, for example, by promoting academic recognition of periods spent abroad and the development of a credit transfer scheme.

### ***Key Questions***

*Does the Erasmus programme meet these objectives/aims? Could it do better and how? Where is it succeeding and failing?*

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Since 1987, when the family of Education and Training programmes were first launched, more than a million people in the European Union have taken advantage of the programmes to study or train in a country other than their own through the Erasmus programme. They have had the opportunity to pick up new skills, learn another language, and see new ways of tackling problems. They have been exposed to another culture, different working methods and perhaps new ideas. In general the programme has helped to promote the diversity of different universities' structures and the richness of the diversity has helped participants in turn to improve university structures. The Erasmus programme allows for the exchange of ideas and expertise. The idea of cohesion is central to Erasmus. Its aim is to create a community and a common European culture. Whether a small or large partner/university, it stresses they are all equal partners and principles of non-discrimination and non-exclusion are crucial to the programme.

From the above it is fair to say that the Erasmus programme has met its objectives in general terms. It allows for two and a half thousand universities in 29 different countries in Europe, with very different education systems and at different stages of economic and social development, to co-operate with each other. Over three quarters of a million students have benefited from a period of mobility during their studies since the start of the Erasmus programme in 1987/88, the vast majority satisfied both academically and socially and with full recognition of their time spend abroad. (In the 1999/2000 academic year 108,000 students were on exchange among all member countries undertaking both undergraduate and postgraduate courses). Equally, many tens of thousands of professors and academic staff have been funded through the programme to teach for short periods abroad in another university, often in a language other than their own.

Despite these accomplishments a deeper analysis by country, by subject, by flows, etc, show that the success assumed by the 'general' results often masks large differences between countries where improvements should still be sought. Results for student mobility will be used to illustrate this.

*1. The problem of Planned and Actual student mobility.*

There continues to be a great discrepancy between planned and actual numbers of mobile students who take part in the programme. Institutions continue to overestimate their mobility numbers by about 100%. This is especially true of the EUR 18 institutions\* where the take-up rates are below 50% with the exception of Austria (65%), Italy (63%), and Spain (58%). The take-up rates for the associated countries are much higher with an overall take-up rate of 78%. Universities over-estimate their capacity to take students and this is a weakness. At present this situation is not improving and needs to be addressed.

*2. The problem of growth in student mobility.*

The growth in the number of students appears to be slowing. For certain countries in the EUR 18 the growth in student numbers has stopped or even dropped. There appears to be a north-south divide. A decline in number of outgoing students was apparent in Belgium and Sweden in 1999/2000, in Denmark, Ireland and the UK in 1998/99, and very little growth has occurred in the Netherlands, Finland, Iceland and Norway. Among the EU States, the Mediterranean countries as well as Austria and Germany are still showing a growing trend. The reasons for this decline and division need to be identified and action needs to be taken.

*3. The problem of under representation of student mobility compared to total student population.*

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\* EUR 18 countries are the European Economic Area countries (i.e. the 15 EU member states plus Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway)

In most EUR 18 countries the Erasmus mobility corresponds to less than 1% of the respective student population – as an average it is 0.78%. But this varies from country to country from 1.6% to 0.5%. These figures reveal some interesting issues for reflection. In order to reach the objective of the Socrates programme of a participation rate of 10% of all students in Erasmus mobility, i.e. a total of 10% of graduates in Europe having participated in Erasmus mobility during their degree study period, the percentage of Erasmus students in a given academic year has to increase by more than 2%. In other words, the Erasmus mobility on average must double if the 10% objective is to be attained, which against the backdrop of signs of saturation in many countries seems to call for supplementary efforts to promote mobility.

The question arises as to whether the countries mentioned here have reached a ‘real’ saturation level, and if so why? Will this tendency to saturate at around 1% of mobility activity be repeated in the EUR 18 and associated countries that currently still have increasing mobility levels? Which are the factors leading to saturation at below the European average level? Which further efforts could be envisaged to improve and even extend the current framework for mobility?

#### *4. The problem of flows in Erasmus student mobility.*

It is helpful to look at the reciprocity in flows from and to each country, both in geographical terms and in terms of subject areas.

**Geographical flows:** It is useful to compare numbers of outgoing and incoming students per country. By far the biggest net importer is the UK, which receives more than double the number of students it sends. This is a huge imbalance. The UK take-up rate is 66%. Other net importing countries are Denmark (take-up rate 58%), France (take-up rate 51%), Ireland (65%), the Netherlands (51%) and Sweden (51%). It is interesting to note that for all these countries, with the exception of France, the language of instruction is often English, which is also the most commonly taught foreign language. So the challenge is to try to encourage a better balance. One of the principles of the Erasmus programme is to promote balance and equality. This problem needs to be addressed and students need to be encouraged to go to different countries.

Reciprocity remains a great challenge for the Associated Countries. The ratio between incoming and outgoing flows ranges generally between 1 in 10 and 1 in 4, with two countries even having a ratio of 1 in 20 (Bulgaria and Slovenia). Take-up rates for incoming students are very low and vary between 5% and 25%. The tendency seems to be that incoming students go to institutions that provide teaching in English. The large discrepancy between the incoming and outgoing rates for these countries is a worrying phenomenon and needs to be monitored carefully.

**Solution?** National Agencies in EU countries promote mobility to the Associated Countries. This promotion takes various forms, from a simple encouragement of higher education institutions to concrete measures such as extra travel grants. In general, the measures used are identical to those implemented for under-represented areas. It is in

reality, however, difficult to fill the available places with suitable candidates. Associated Countries have not mentioned any particular measures that could be envisaged on their side to increase incoming flows. This is an issue that needs further discussion with the National authorities and their National Agencies.

Active policy initiatives have been taken on behalf of National Agencies to compensate for a lack of balance in flows (and there is great disparity in the approaches of the different agencies). For those that present a more active policy, a fairly common approach is to simply encourage the higher education institutions to take into consideration the underrepresented areas.

In some cases priority is given to non-traditional partners by providing a higher grant to individuals.

Other stronger measures taken by some agencies, is to set aside a small percentage of the global National Agency budget for incentives for under-represented areas, in an aim to promote mobility to these areas. A very strong approach is a system of rewards and penalties e.g. to give relatively fewer grants to over-represented areas and priority to under-represented areas.

### ***Conclusion***

Efforts to promote mobility need to be taken beyond the current framework for mobility. The European Commission's recommendations propose different types of indirect financial support, such as reduction in fares and accommodation as well as the establishment of systems of loans to cover the costs of mobility. At the same time, targeted promotional activities, including the creation of a Web page for Erasmus students, need to be considered. Another relevant tool is the increased use of new information and communication techniques to promote mobility. The e-learning initiative could be a possible vehicle for the use of virtual mobility to promote increased physical mobility. Finally, the promotion of Erasmus student mobility is also strongly linked with the ongoing developments in higher education systems in Europe and the continuing extension of specific structures within higher education institutions, such as the Bologna process and academic recognition.